**South Asia**

South Asia—which includes the nations of **India**, **Pakistan**, **Afghanistan**, **Bangladesh**, **Bhutan**, **Sri Lanka**, **the Maldives**, and **Nepal**—is one of the **most densely populated regions on Earth**, one-fourth of the world's population lives here, or more than 1.6 billion people. As a consequence, the area faces challenges with regard to humanity's interaction with nature. However, South Asia continues to enjoy tremendous **biodiversity**, with dramatic differences in animal and plant life throughout the region. Characterized by the **world's tallest mountain range**, several punishing **deserts**, and lush **tropical rain forests**, South Asia is also **rich in cultural traditions**, with hundreds of ethnic groups that practice many different religions and speak dozens of languages.

**Landforms**

The movement of the world's tectonic plates created the dramatic landscapes that make up South Asia. Making up the most of the region, the Indian subcontinent formed on the Indo-Australian Plate, which collided with the Eurasian Plate to the north to form the **Himalaya Mountains**—**the highest range on Earth**. The Himalayas, as well as other ranges, act as barriers (obstacles) between South Asia and its northern neighbors. South of these mountains lies the **Deccan Plateau** which is between 1,500 feet and 2,500 feet above sea level.

Between the Himalayas and the Deccan Plateau is the **Indo-Gangetic Plain**, a region bordered by the **Ganges and Indus rivers**. Stretching across the most fertile regions of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, the densely populated Indo-Gangetic Plain is the **center of agricultural activity** throughout South Asia. Not to be forgotten are the many deserts of the region, as well as the **islands** of the Indian Ocean, particularly the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Mostly tropical, these islands are often **densely forested**, and, like the rest of South Asia, are home to an **abundance of animal life.**

**Climate**

**The climate of South Asia is diverse**. Most of the climate of the region is **monsoonal**, with 90% of the year's precipitation (rainfall) coming in the summer and autumn months. **Along the coastal regions, monsoons can wreak havoc when they arrive**, with violent winds and flooding rains; while **in the deserts, the monsoons are greeted with joy**, as they bring precious water to sustain life in an otherwise arid (dry) environment. The months between June and September are the wettest for Pakistan and the western coast of India, while the eastern coast of India and its neighbors, including Bangladesh, experience their wettest months between September and December. In the Indian Ocean, **typhoons** (storms) can develop during the monsoon season, increasing rainfall greatly and bringing extreme destruction. One of history's most devastating tropical cyclones, a November 1970 typhoon, struck Bangladesh with devastating power and killed more than 500,000 people.

In the wintertime, the arid **Great Indian Desert may experience freezing temperatures** at night, and the **Himalayas receive large amounts of snow**. More **temperate inland** and coastal regions of South Asia, however, generally enjoy dry, pleasant weather during the winter months. Rain may fall in tropical areas, especially in Bangladesh, but not nearly at the rate that it falls during the monsoon season. In most parts of South Asia outside of the Himalayan region, winter is considered the most pleasant season of the year and is the peak time for tourism and travel, particularly for those unaccustomed to the **dramatic heat** of the summer months.

**Natural Resources and Agriculture**

The diverse landscape of South Asia is **famously rich in natural resources**, **including hardwoods, coastal fish reserves, salts, medicinal plants, and indigenous (native) cereals.** Moreover, South Asia is blessed with climates that are ideal for producing large amounts of **agricultural abundance**—a necessity in such a densely populated part of the world. In many of the wettest regions **slash-and-burn agriculture is practiced**. Slash and burn agriculture is when farmers clear patches of forest using fire, then sow their crops in the burned-out areas. **Rice, corn, and many vegetables thrive** (grow well) under post-fire conditions, as does **cotton**, an important crop for clothing production. Settled agriculture, however, is the most common form of farming practiced in South Asia and is particularly successful in well-irrigated and well-drained regions, most notably in central India. Settled farming does not only allow for the production of food for subsistence, but also for extensive plantations of **export crops, including tea, cotton, sugarcane, and rice**. Although most agriculture in India is still very labor-intensive, with people and animals doing the bulk of the work, larger concerns have introduced high-technology equipment, resulting in far higher crop harvests than possible with traditional farming methods. However, as the already bursting population grows, issues of having enough food continue to haunt the region.

**Southeast Asia**

Clustered on a **peninsula** extending southward from the Asian continent and scattered across a huge **archipelago** (group of islands) of some 20,000 islands, the 11 independent nations of Southeast Asia (**Myanmar**, **Vietnam**, **Thailand**, **Cambodia**, **the Philippines**, **Brunei**, **Malaysia**, **East Timor**, **Singapore**, **Indonesia**, and **Laos**) are united by landforms and climate. The region's people and cultures are, however, highly diverse. With **active volcanoes, an unpredictable monsoon climate, and often-unstable political situations,** Southeast Asia has faced many challenges in modern times—including the devastation that occurred following a major tsunami in 2004 and a 2006 earthquake. Yet, with proud cultures descended from ancient civilizations, the people of this region are constantly working in distinctive ways to master these and other challenges.

**Landforms**

Prior to World War II, Southeast Asia was known by several different names, including "Further India," the "East Indies," and "Indochina." The western boundary of Southeast Asia is generally considered to be the Indian subcontinent, with China creating a boundary to the north, and the Pacific Ocean bordering Southeast Asia to the east.

Surrounding the nations of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, mainland Southeast Asia is a largely **mountainous region with low-lying agricultural areas** in Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar. A **number of rivers**, including the Mekong, Yuan, Irrawaddy, and Chao Phraya separate the mountain ranges in Indochina from one another, creating **fertile valleys and plains** between the large mountaintops that spread outward from the eastern Himalayas. These waterways contribute to the muddy richness these waterways bring to of the surrounding agricultural areas.

**Climate**

Southeast Asia is known for its generally **tropical, rainy weather**. The **average daily temperature hovers around 80ºF**, and the area typically receives between **60 and 100 inches of rain each year**, although more precipitation (rain) falls on islands, coastal regions, and mountains than in the interior of such countries as Thailand and Myanmar. While there is little seasonal difference in temperature throughout most of Southeast Asia, in the far north and especially in coastal areas, monsoon wind patterns create a more marked summer/winter contrast, with cool dry winters following hot and wet summers. The **monsoon season lasts from November to March** and is vital to the economy of the region.

**Natural Resources and Agriculture**

**Agriculture is the predominant economic activity in Southeast Asia,** where the "**rice bowl**" of Thailand produces not just rice but also **maize and cassava**. **Rice is a main crop i**n Vietnam and Myanmar as well. Other important crops and natural resources include **rubber, sugarcane, pineapples, and such woods as teak, ebony, and mahogany**. The region is also **rich in mineral resources**; a significant percentage of the world's tin supply comes from Indonesia, and **petroleum, coal, copper, and gold** are also mined extensively in several Southeast Asian countries. Although agriculture has traditionally been the region's economic support, Southeast Asia's **industrial (manufacturing) sector has been expanding** rapidly in recent years.

*Reading adapted from "South Asia" and “Southeast Asia.” World Geography: Understanding a Changing World. ABC-CLIO*