

Human and Animal Populations and Transportation Networks

The human population distribution in Central America reflects terrain and climatic conditions. Generally sparse in the Caribbean coastal regions with the exception of the port cities themselves, the population in the western coastal zones is somewhat higher and agricultural exploitation considerably greater.

Capital cities have been founded in the central highlands to escape the torrid coastal zones of both east and west, and population settlement in general has followed this logical trend. Even San Salvador, relatively close to the Pacific coast, is still built at the beginning of the central highland zone.

Animals are plentiful in all of Central America. This wealth of animal life, both wild and domestic, offers a variety of exceptional richness. Domestic animals are a mainstay both of the largely agricultural regional economy and of the transport system in the rural zones. Cattle are very numerous and mules, horses and other farm animals are everywhere in the settled regions of Central America. The mules and horses serve not only as a standard means of transport for the peasantry but also serve as pack animals for both insurgents and government forces in many inhospitable areas.

Wild animals also abound throughout Central America but forest and scrub lands have an especially wide range of types. These may include anteaters, armadillos, bears, coyotes, deer, foxes, jaguars, otters, peccaries, pumas, rodents, sloths, tapirs and wild cats. Crocodiles, iguanas, lizards, turtles and snakes such as rattlers, boa constrictors and pythons inhabit the steamy lowlands and especially the jungle regions. In all areas, both land and water birds are ubiquitous.

The land communication system is not well developed but its condition varies from country to country. The main cities of Guatemala, for example, are linked by fairly good roads, usually paved and continually improving. The Pan-American Highway (PAH) cuts through the country from north-west to south-east and is in very good condition. Another good highway runs through the agriculture-rich lowlands of the Pacific coastal region. In rural areas, including most border zones, however, roads are rare and dirt tracks the rule. Roads to Mexico are very few and concentrated in the Pacific coast area except for the Pan-American Highway itself somewhat farther inland. In the crucial areas of Petén, Alta Verapaz and northern Huehuetenango, roads are virtually non-existent and border control is all but impossible. On the other hand, roads and tracks across the Salvadorean boundary are relatively plentiful with two particularly good highways, one near the Pacific and the other in the centre of the border zone.