

How does geography connect people?

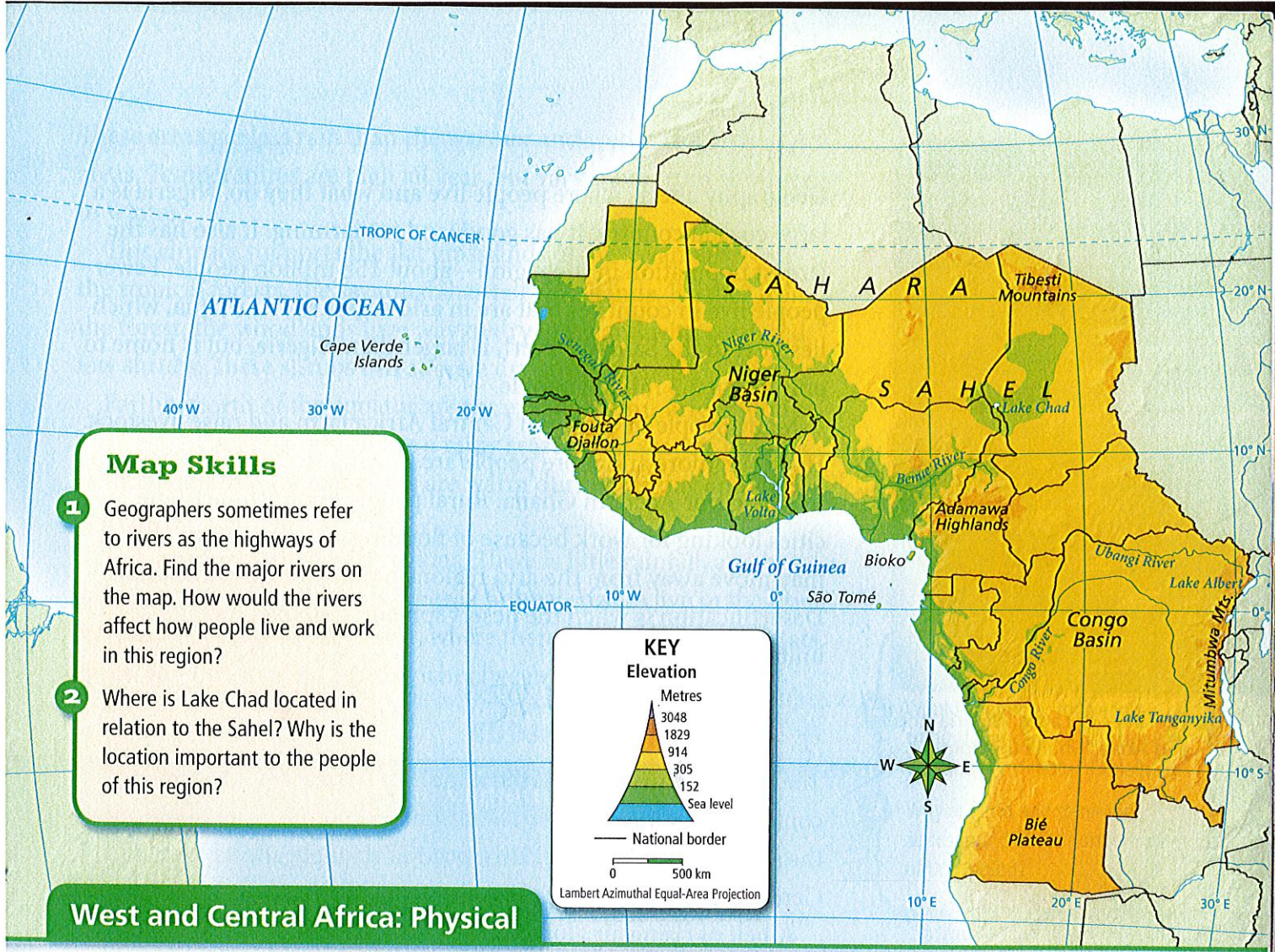


▲ People cross the Niger River by boat on their way to the market in the town of Ayorou, Niger.

Physical Features of West and Central Africa

Evelyn lives in Ghana, a country in West Africa. Ghana is part of the Niger River basin, the largest drainage basin in West Africa. A drainage basin is the entire area of land from which rainfall flows into a river or lake. The Niger River basin covers more than 2 million square kilometres of land—more than Saskatchewan and Manitoba combined. Heavy rains in the Niger River basin can cause flooding.

The Chad basin in Central Africa also drains a huge area. Lake Chad lies in the centre of the basin. Lake Chad is a shallow lake, the largest body of water in the Sahel. The Sahel is a semi-arid, fairly dry area that lies near the Sahara Desert. Lake Chad is an important source of water for the people in that area.



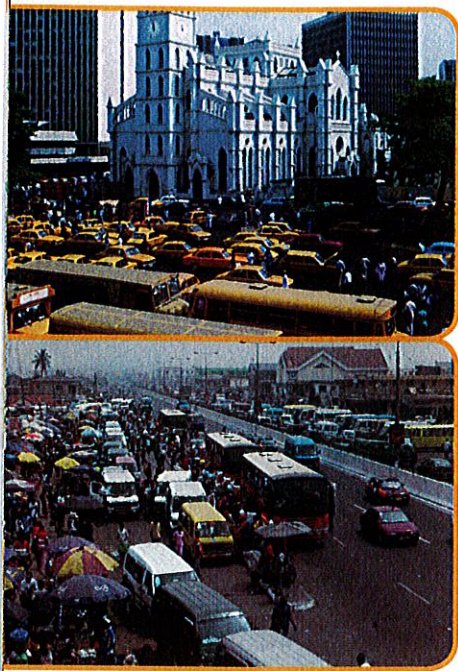
West and Central Africa: Physical

The Congo River drains most of Central Africa. Heavy rainfall feeds the Congo through most of the year. The Congo basin has a large network of navigable rivers, or rivers that boats can pass through. However, waterfalls and rapids in some areas can make passage difficult.

The world's largest hot desert, the Sahara, reaches down into West and Central Africa from the north. Other dry areas also occur in the far south. Between the dry areas, grasslands blend into lush tropical rainforest at the region's centre.

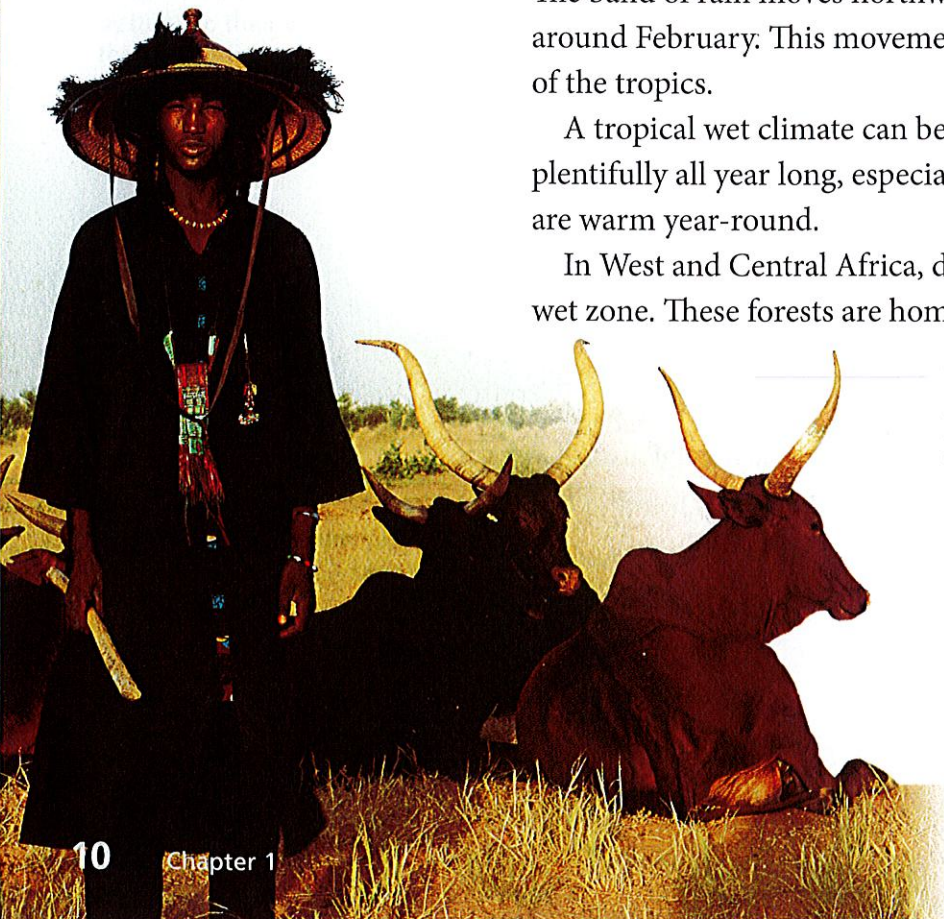
Much of the continent of Africa is a plateau, a raised flat area of land. Although highland areas exist, there are no major mountain chains, because the land has been ground down by millions of years of erosion. Low elevations in the northwest build to higher elevations in the southeast.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
 How can the words *plateau*, *rainforests*, and *deserts* help you remember what the landscape looks like in West and Central Africa?



▲ The cities of Lagos, Nigeria (top), and Accra, Ghana (bottom)

▼ This man herds cattle on the savannah.



The Environment of West and Central Africa

Geography affects where people live and what they do. Nigeria is a large coastal country. It has good land for farming. It also has the largest population in the region—about 158 million people. Fewer people live in countries that are in arid regions. Mauritania, which lies next to the Sahara Desert, is larger than Nigeria, but is home to only about 3.3 million people.

Many people in West and Central Africa farm and raise livestock. However, more and more people are moving to cities such as Lagos in Nigeria or Accra in Ghana. Rural people might come to the cities looking for work because of flooding or failed crops. Others may move away from the arid regions because of desertification. Desertification is when the desert spreads, making cropland unusable.

A Variety of Climates

The equator runs through the middle of Africa. About half of the continent is in the northern hemisphere, and the other half is in the southern hemisphere. This location strongly affects West and Central Africa's climate zones.

A belt of rising air along the equator causes heavy rain to fall. The band of rain moves northward around July and southward around February. This movement creates the wet and dry seasons of the tropics.

A tropical wet climate can be found along the equator. Rain falls plentifully all year long, especially in spring and fall. Temperatures are warm year-round.

In West and Central Africa, dense rainforests grow in the tropical wet zone. These forests are home to birds, reptiles, and insects.

Monkeys and flying squirrels live in the forest canopy, or the topmost layer of the trees. Large animals, such as elephants, roam the forest floor.

The climate gradually gets drier farther from the equator. North and south of the tropical wet zone are the tropical wet and dry zones.

These areas get less rain than the warmer and wetter tropical areas. Temperatures are high all year, but vary more from summer to winter.

This climate supports the flat grasslands of the savannah. Near the tropical forests, the savannah has tall woodlands. Farther from the forest, the woodlands give way to dry grassland with scattered low shrubs. These shrubs can survive dry spells.

Farther north of the equator are the arid and semi-arid regions. The semi-arid Sahel region has a rainy season that may be as long as three months. Temperatures are warm during the day and cool at night.

The arid zones are desert regions. There is little rainfall, and hot days contrast with cold nights. Fewer animal species live in the drier regions, especially in the desert, where there is little vegetation. Rats, hares, gazelles, hyenas, and ostriches live in these areas.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

How would the lives of the people in the dry areas be different from the lives of those living in the rainforest?

Map Skills

- 1 Would you prefer to live in a tropical wet climate or a tropical wet and dry climate? Explain.
- 2 Why are arid and semi-arid zones found in the northern part of this region?

West and Central Africa: Climate

