African Geography

Africa is the world’s second largest continent and also the second most populated country in the world. The population of Africa is over 900 million people making up 14% of the planet’s population. Among the 50 independent African countries there are vast population differences. Nigeria, for example is populated by 150 million people while Niger and Namibia are much more sparsely populated with populations below 5 million persons. As well population differences Africa is comprised of a wide range of environments. Vast expanses of arid and potentially hostile and life threatening deserts, massive areas of tropical rainforests, savanna grasslands teeming with animal life, huge areas of treacherous swampland, home to tropical diseases such as malaria and snow capped mountains such as Mount Kilimanjaro in Kenya. Africa is also home to a wide variety of flora and fauna. One suggested classroom activity could be to draw up a list of the flora and fauna to be found on the African continent. The actual geographical size of the African continent is able to encompass the entire land mass of the USA, China, India and Argentina which in themselves are huge countries in their own right. The continent of Africa is covers a geographical area of 11.6 million square miles and the journey down from the north to the southern most point is about 5,500 miles.

The Sahara Desert lies in Africa. This is the world’s largest desert, and from its western fringes on the Atlantic Ocean, is part of an extensive desert belt which stretches east, all of the way to China. The Sahara Desert itself covers an area which crosses the borders of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Sudan. The actual distance between the western edge of this desert on the Atlantic Ocean and its eastern fringe along the Red Sea coast is 5,700 km’s and covers an area of 8.6 million square kilometers taking in parts of the stunning Atlas Mountain range and the Sudanese Sahel region. The physical environment of the Sahara Desert is extremely harsh. The average annual rainfall is below 25 cm’s and during the daytime temperatures can rise to as much as 58 degrees Celsius in the shade. Temperatures during the day and night vary considerably and after sunset can become very cold. Many types of flora and fauna can be found in this harsh desert environment as well as vast quantities of oil and salt which for many centuries played a major role in the development of a viable trans-Saharan trade network. At one time a kilo of salt could purchase its same weight in gold dust. Today in the Sahara Desert, Libya accesses another valuable harvest. Sub-soil water which is then pumped to its many cities and
towns. This represents a new and desperately important harvest where water is becoming an extremely precious commodity and valuable natural resource.

Africa’s raised rock plateau was formed sometime between 3,600 million years and 500 million years ago. When this time scale is placed against the historical fact that forest agriculture in Africa is around 15,000 years old, one is made to realize how relatively modern our own history upon planet earth is. The continent of Africa is extremely rich in minerals and some of its mines are thousands of years old but the agricultural soil in many of its regions is very poor. This has meant that African farmers have had to be very inventive in working this hostile environment in order to grow sufficient crops to feed and maintain local communities. The rock structures in Africa differ from other continents, such as Asia which is dominated by the Himalayan mountain range because very few of these prehistoric rock structures folded into mountain ranges. Africa’s existing climate would have been totally different if a chain of mountains ran the length and breadth of the continent. It is estimated that between 23 million years and 5 million years ago a series of faulting and volcanic eruptions occurred in East Africa which led to the formation of rift valleys and highland areas which in turn caused a disruption of the lateral climate belts and the creation of very different historical patterns for West and east Africa. They are seen as being very separate and set apart from one another in both a geographical and historical perspective.

Commencing at the equator, bands of temperature run north and south across the African continent. Large expanses of equatorial rain forest on both sides of the equator dominate the landscape. Eventually this forest area thins out and merges into savanna grassland which then form extensive desert regions but along both the north and south coastal strips there exists a Mediterranean type climate.

Africa’s coastal northern strip is bordered and linked directly to the Mediterranean Sea. Historically, this whole region is linked to the various Ancient Egyptian dynasties, the Phoenician city-state of Carthage and the Greek and Roman empires. South of this region lies the Sahara Desert which covers an area from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean across to the Red sea. The east to west zone south of the Sahara Desert is comprised of many diverse environments. There are semi arid regions in the north lying next to the Sahara while much further to the east in Ethiopia there are fertile
highland and green valleys while on both the east and west coastal areas are treacherous disease ridden swampland. Located within this region, south of the Sahara, the medieval kingdoms and empires such as Mali, Bornu and Songhai were located as well as the gold mines of Wangara which played such a vital and important role in the trans-Saharan trade routes. From early on in the 15th century through till the 19th century the African west coast provided the trading posts for European slavers and companies who amassed vast profits from the trans-Atlantic slave trade and through other commodities such as gold. This trade was one of the catalysts which helped to change the agricultural and industrial landscape of the United Kingdom. Slaves shipped across the Atlantic from these trading posts also provided the indentured workforce for plantations in the Americas for a number of centuries and profits accumulated from these brutal regimes still help to shape contemporary American politics. Also it is in Africa that some of the causes for the two world wars of the 20th century can be found, leading to the slaughter of millions of people, and the holocaust where much of the European Jewish population and culture died in concentration camps and mass killings. Colonial rivalry between England and Germany prior to the First World War was one of the causes of this conflict. The peace treaty signed at Versailles at the close of the First World War sowed the seeds for the rise to power in Germany of Hitler and the Nazi party in the 1930’s.

The equatorial rainforest of the Congo covers an area from Africa’s west coast to the Mountains of the Moon and on to the Great Lakes in the east. Within these forests there are great apes such as gorillas which as a result of poaching and illegal logging have become endangered species. Pigmy people also live within this environment and they represent one of the oldest surviving groups of African people. The equatorial rainforest also acts as a physical barrier diving the east of Africa from its western half and the northern region from the southern region. The remaining area of Africa is L-shaped and covers a low altitude coastal region linked to a massive interior plateau which flattens out between 3000 ft and 5000 ft above sea level and in this region a multitude of varying climatic conditions exist. Monsoon winds dominate the east coast of Africa. During the first half of the year they blow in a southerly direction and in the second half switch to a northerly direction. It is along this eastern shoreline that the oldest remains relating to early man have been found though recently in September 2009 it was announced that archaeological remains of early man had been found in Georgia so this period of man’s evolution is being constantly rewritten and
revised. This coastline faces the Arabian peninsular and the countries of India, Indonesia and China. Large primeval ferns called cycads, a plant similar to ferns which once grew in large ancient forests can be found as well as the enormous baobab tree whose trunk has a diameter of over 100 ft. Branches of this tree grow at the top of a baobab tree’s trunk and then fade to nothing. This tree is a survivor and relic of these ancient primeval forests and can have a natural life span of over 1000 years.

**Classroom Activities**
1. Map out the belt of deserts from the Sahara to China. Mark out the major towns and possible ancient trading centers. Working in small groups create a board game which can take one across this belt of deserts. Think about the terrain and the problems that would be encountered.
2. Divide the African continent into its various different geographical regions. Within each region identify up to 5 important facts such as climate, rainfall, environment, fauna and flora etc.
3. Create/make/draw simple bar graphs showing rainfall, temperature could come from text books in the school library, from search engines such as Google. Compare and contrast differences. Discuss in small groups how these different climates would effect the environment and life styles and the local economies.
4. Map out the river systems and name them. This information could come from an atlas or through a search engine.
5. Map out other transport systems such as roads.
6. Devise a board game using knowledge gained from these activities.
7. List as much different types of flora and fauna to be found in Africa today. Highlight the species which are endangered.