

**Module: Australia and the Pacific Islands**  
**Topic Content: Physical Features of Australia and the Pacific Islands**

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**Introduction**

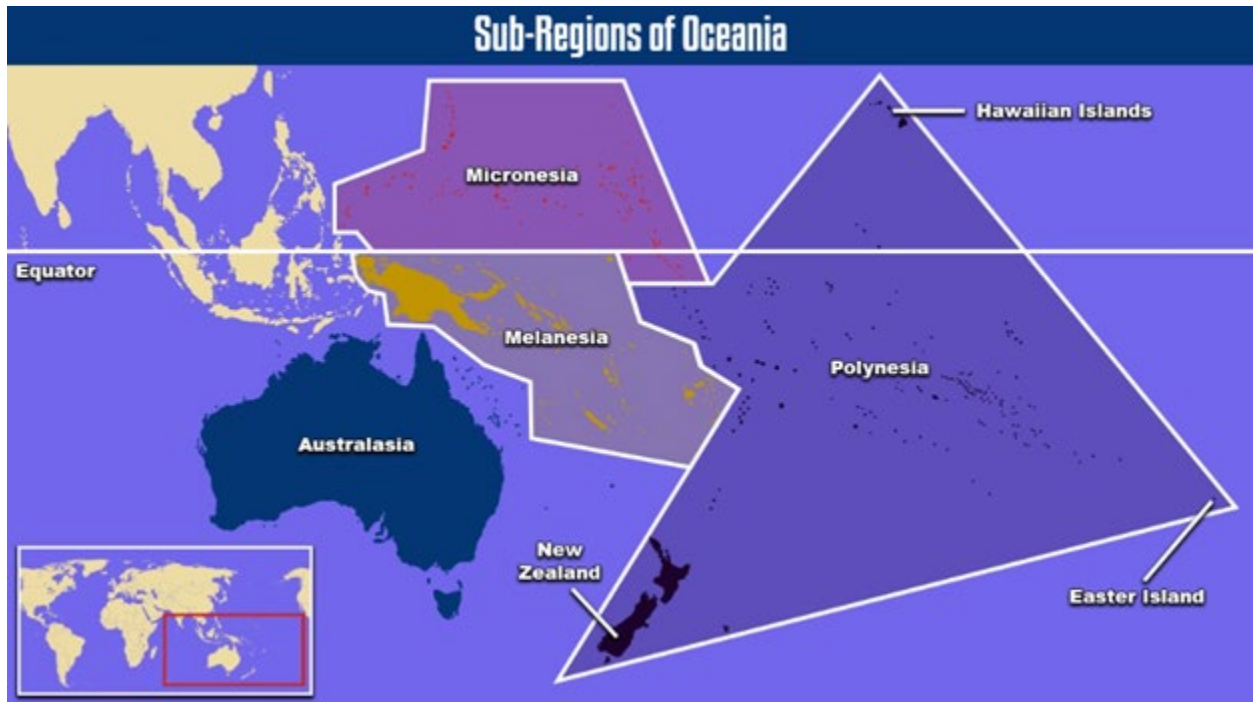


Australia and the Pacific Islands form a geographic region that is located east of the Indian Ocean and southeast of the Asian continent. The region is also known as Oceania. It contains thousands of islands that are spread throughout the Pacific Ocean.

# Module: Australia and the Pacific Islands

## Topic Content: Physical Features of Australia and the Pacific Islands

### Sub-Regions of Oceania



Oceania can be separated into four sub-regions. The first sub-region is called Australasia. It includes the continent of Australia and its nearby islands. This region contains most of the land area in Oceania. Some geographers also include New Zealand as part of Australasia.

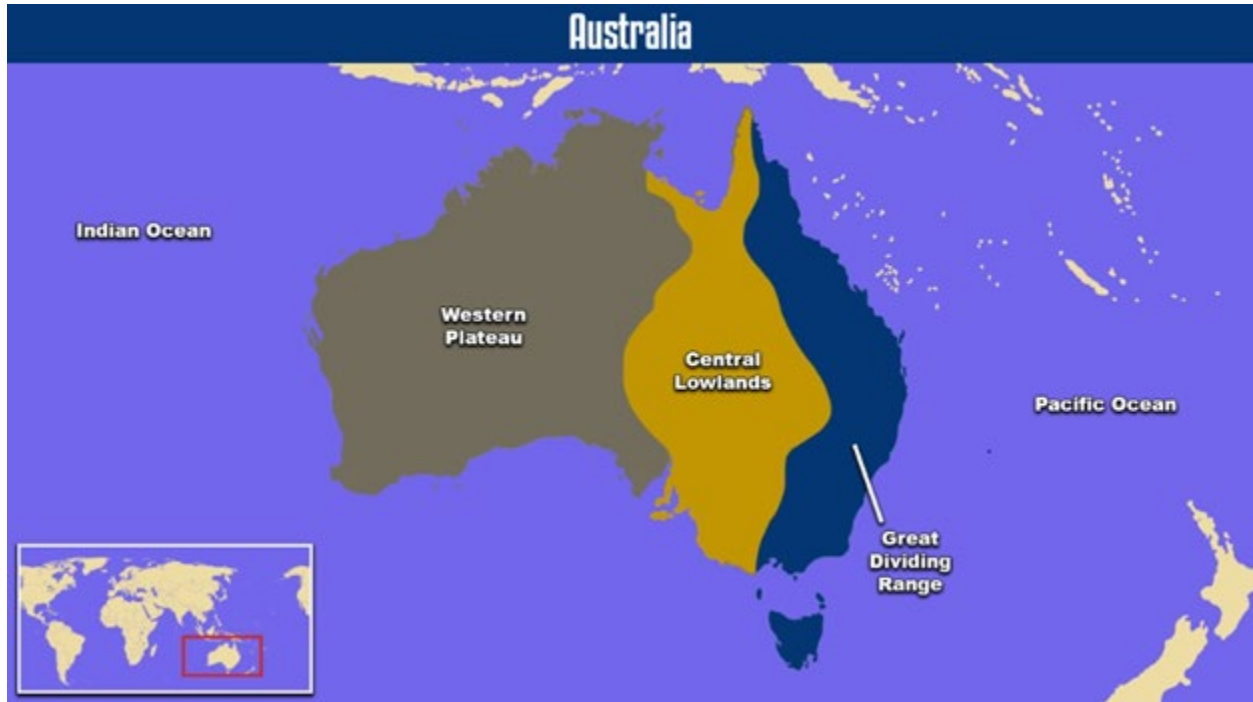
The second sub-region is Melanesia. It is located northeast of Australia and south of the equator. New Guinea is the largest island in Melanesia.

The third sub-region is Micronesia. It is located east of the Philippines and north of the equator. Micronesia contains thousands of small islands.

The final sub-region is Polynesia. It is located east of Melanesia and Micronesia, in the Central Pacific Ocean. Polynesia includes thousands of islands that are located in a triangular area known as the Polynesian Triangle. The three points of this triangle are New Zealand, Easter Island, and the Hawaiian Islands.

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**Australia**



Australia is the smallest continent in the world; however, it makes up most of the land area in Oceania. It is located in the Southern Hemisphere, between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The name Australia is derived from the Latin word *australis*, which means south. Australia can be divided into three major regions: the Great Dividing Range, the Central Lowlands, and the Western Plateau.

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**Great Dividing Range**



The Great Dividing Range is located along the eastern coast of Australia. This region is also known as the Eastern Highlands. It contains a series of mountains, plateaus, and escarpments that run north and south, parallel to the Pacific coast. The Great Dividing Range separates the Australian rivers that flow east from those that flow west. This region also contains a narrow strip of lowland coastal plain. The coastal plain receives regular rainfall and is the most densely populated part of Australia.

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**Central Lowlands**



The Central Lowlands are located west of the Great Dividing Range. This region mostly consists of semiarid grassland and desert. The Central Lowlands receive little precipitation; however, the region has access to a fresh water source called the Great Artesian Basin. The Great Artesian Basin contains pressurized ground water that naturally flows to the surface. It is the primary water source for many parts of the Central Lowlands. It provides water to farms, cattle stations, and rural communities in the region.

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**Western Plateau**



The Western Plateau covers approximately two-thirds of Australia. This region is also known as the Australian Outback. The Western Plateau is the least populated part of Australia. The climate is mostly arid and the terrain is covered by stony and sandy desert. There are several large deserts in the region, including the Great Sandy Desert, the Great Victoria Desert, and the Gibson Desert.

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**Great Barrier Reef**



The Great Barrier Reef is located off the northeastern coast of Australia. It is the longest coral reef system in the world. A coral reef is a rocky underwater ridge that is made of the remains of tiny marine animals called coral. This habitat supports a wide variety of aquatic life. The Great Barrier Reef is home to many different species, including more than 1,500 species of fish. The Great Barrier Reef is a popular tourist destination. A large part of the reef is protected as a national park.



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**Volcanic Islands**



There are approximately 25,000 islands located in the Pacific Ocean. These islands fall into one of three categories, based on how they formed.

Volcanic islands are formed by underwater volcanoes. Tectonic activity on the ocean floor can cause a volcanic eruption. As the lava cools and hardens, it builds up slowly over time. Given enough time, an undersea volcano will rise above the surface of the water and form an island. Volcanic rock breaks down into fertile soil that can support a variety of vegetation. The Hawaiian Islands are an example of volcanic islands.

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**Coral Islands**



Coral islands are small sandy islands that form when a coral reef rises above the surface of the ocean. A coral reef is made of the remains of coral and other sea life. These remains turn to limestone over time, and build up in layers. Rocky debris and sand also help build up the reef, creating a coral island. These islands have sandy soil that limits vegetation.

Sometimes a coral reef forms around a volcanic island. Over time, the dormant volcano is eroded away. The volcanic island eventually sinks below the ocean, but the coral reef remains. This creates a ring shaped coral island that surrounds a lagoon. This landform is called an atoll.

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**Continental Islands**



Continental islands were originally part of a larger continent. Tectonic plates move slowly over time. This movement may cause a piece of land to break off from a continent, forming an island. Continental islands can also be formed by rising sea levels. As the ocean rises, pieces of land that were once connected can become separated by water. New Guinea and New Zealand are examples of continental islands.

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**Antarctica**



Antarctica is the fifth largest continent in the world. It is also the coldest and driest continent. In fact, it is technically the world's largest desert. Most of the continent lies below the Antarctic Circle, at the southernmost point of the Earth. Around 98% of Antarctica is covered with a thick layer of ice.