

Module: Sub-Saharan Africa
Topic Content: Physical Features of Sub-Saharan Africa

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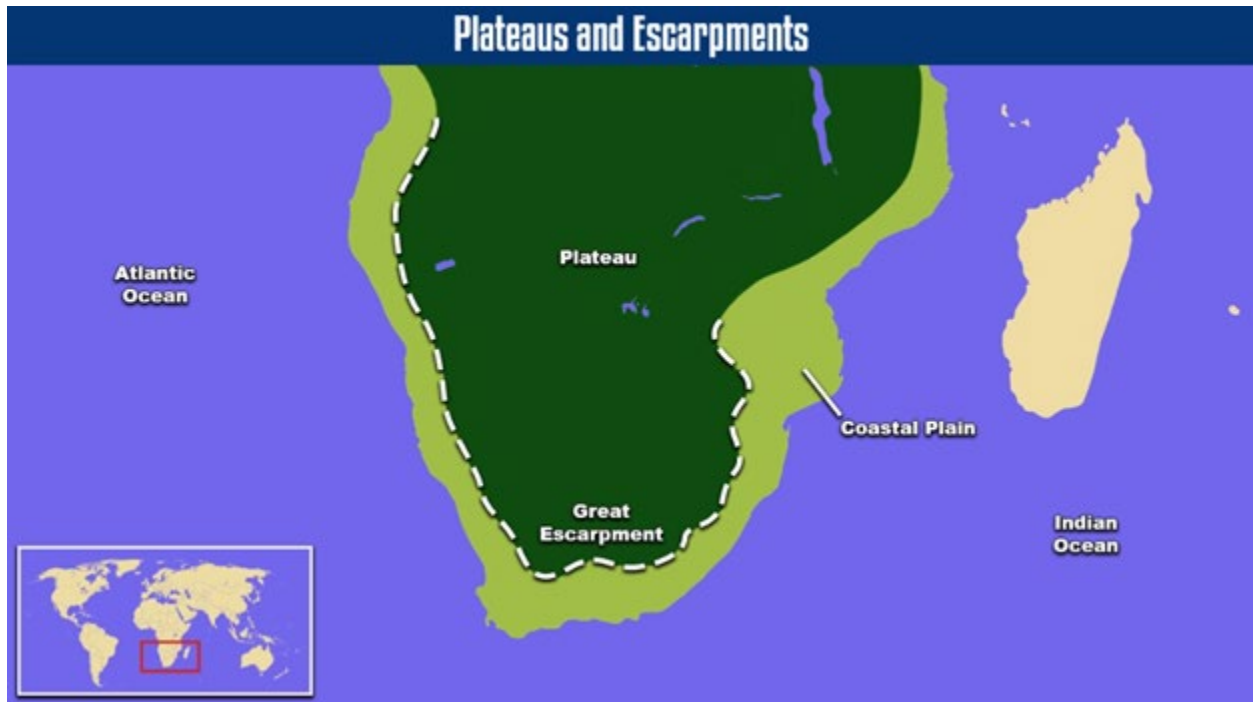
Location



Sub-Saharan Africa is a geographic region located on the African continent. It encompasses all of the land located south of the Sahara. It is framed by several major bodies of water. The Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Guinea are located to the west. The Red Sea and the Indian Ocean are located to the east. There are many small islands located off the coast. Madagascar is the largest island. It is located off the southeastern coast in the Indian Ocean.

Module: Sub-Saharan Africa
Topic Content: Physical Features of Sub-Saharan Africa

Plateaus and Escarpments



Africa is essentially a giant plateau. In fact, geographers sometimes describe it as the “Plateau Continent.” This is because Africa is mostly composed of large expanses of flat elevated land. The inland plateaus are bordered by narrow coastal plains. Cliffs with steep slopes form where the highland plateaus meet the lowland coastal plains. These cliffs are called escarpments. Southern Africa is surrounded by a large escarpment, called the Great Escarpment.

Module: Sub-Saharan Africa

Topic Content: Physical Features of Sub-Saharan Africa

Deserts



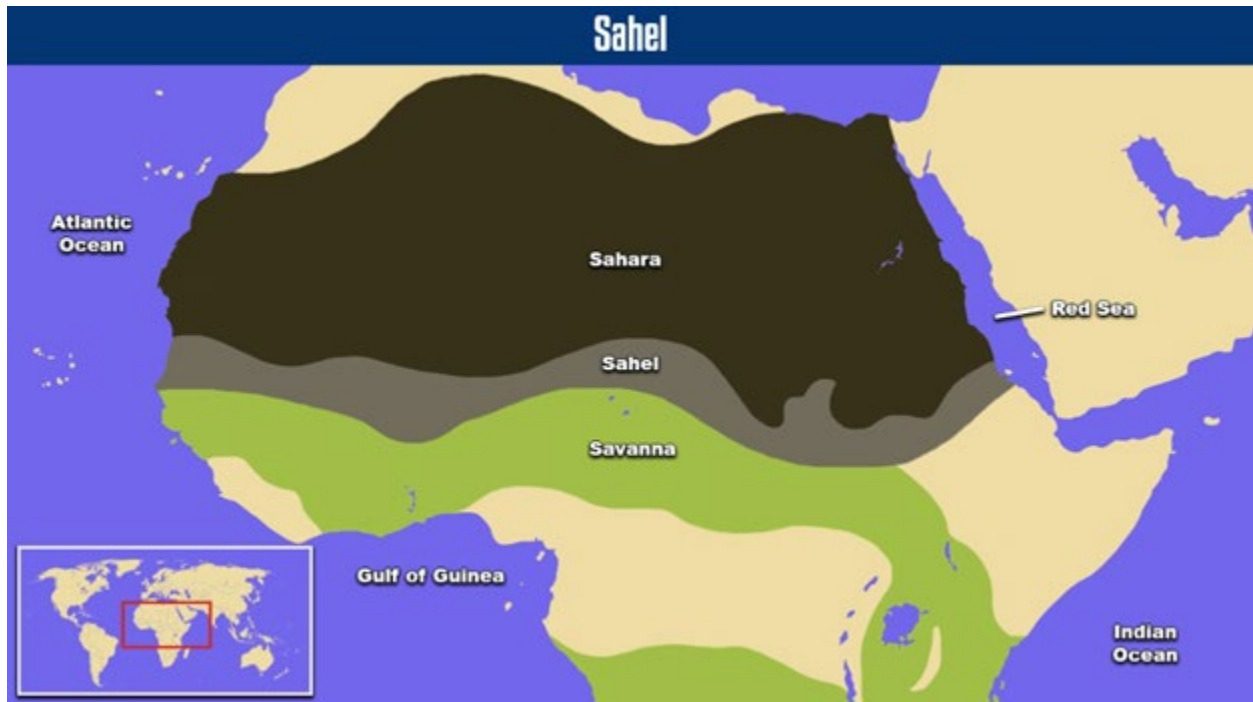
There are three deserts located in Africa. The largest desert is the Sahara, which is in North Africa. The other two deserts are located in Sub-Saharan Africa. They are the Kalahari Desert and the Namib Desert.

The Kalahari Desert is located in Southern Africa. Some geographers do not consider the Kalahari a “true” desert. Technically, deserts receive fewer than ten inches of rain per year. This applies to some areas of the Kalahari Desert. However, other areas receive twenty inches of rain annually. This precipitation helps support a variety of plant and animal life.

The Namib Desert is a coastal desert located west of the Kalahari. It spans a narrow region between the Atlantic Ocean and the Great Escarpment. The Namib Desert is extremely dry. It receives less than half an inch of rain annually. Because of this, there is much less plant and animal life found in the Namib.

Module: Sub-Saharan Africa
Topic Content: Physical Features of Sub-Saharan Africa

Sahel



The Sahel is a semiarid region located south of the Sahara. It extends across the continent, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. The Sahel serves as a buffer between the arid climate of the Sahara and the tropical wet and dry climate of the African savanna. Desertification is an environmental threat to this region. Over-farming and over-grazing deplete the soil and cause erosion. This causes the Sahara to spread farther south. Climate change has increased the risk of desertification in the Sahel.

Module: Sub-Saharan Africa

Topic Content: Physical Features of Sub-Saharan Africa

Major Rivers



The Nile River is the longest river in Africa and in the world. It begins near the equator and flows north toward the Mediterranean Sea. This river has provided freshwater and fertile soil to the region since ancient times. The Nile has two main tributaries: the Blue Nile and the White Nile.

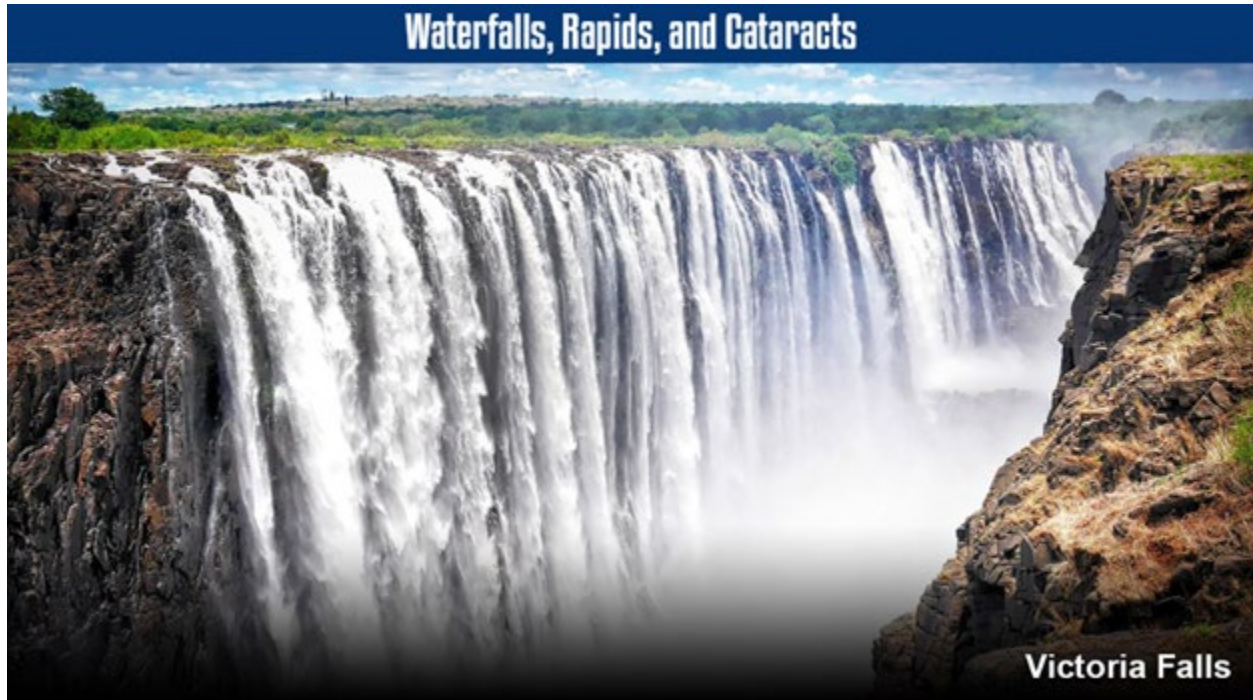
The Congo River is the second-longest river in Africa. It is mostly located within the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Congo River flows through Central Africa toward the Atlantic Ocean. It is also known as the Zaire River.

The Niger River is the third-longest river in Africa. It is located in West Africa and is the most important river in the region. The Niger River flows along a crescent-shaped path that travels inland toward the Sahara before turning south and emptying into the Gulf of Guinea.

The Zambezi River is the fourth-longest river in Africa. The Zambezi flows east through Central and Southern Africa before emptying into the Indian Ocean.

Module: Sub-Saharan Africa
Topic Content: Physical Features of Sub-Saharan Africa

Waterfalls, Rapids, and Cataracts



Many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are completely landlocked. Although there are several major river systems in the region, most of these waterways are unnavigable. Ships can travel in certain sections, but transportation is limited by waterfalls, rapids, and cataracts. A cataract is a type of waterfall that is very large and powerful. Victoria Falls is an example of a cataract. Victoria Falls is located on the Zambezi River, between the countries of Zambia and Zimbabwe. Victoria Falls has the largest curtain of falling water in the world.

Module: Sub-Saharan Africa
Topic Content: Physical Features of Sub-Saharan Africa

Great Rift Valley



The Great Rift Valley is a system of faults located in eastern Africa. These faults were formed gradually over millions of years. The African Plate is slowly being pulled apart, and will eventually break into two plates. As the African Plate separates, rifts are created in the Earth's crust. These rifts form long narrow valleys surrounded by active volcanoes and mountains. The largest of these mountains is Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. Mount Kilimanjaro is a dormant volcano and the tallest mountain in Africa. Its summit reaches 19,341 feet above sea level.

Module: Sub-Saharan Africa
Topic Content: Physical Features of Sub-Saharan Africa

Great Rift Valley (continued)



The separation of the African Plate has also formed several deep lakes in the Great Rift Valley. These lakes are known as the African Great Lakes. The largest lakes are Lake Victoria, Lake Tanganyika, and Lake Malawi. Lake Victoria is the second-largest freshwater lake in the world by surface area, after Lake Superior in North America. It is also a major source of the Nile River. Lake Tanganyika is the second-largest freshwater lake by volume, after Lake Baikal in Siberia.