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Bridging the Americas

Welcome to Panama

Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center



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****To view a PowerPoint presentation on Panama and the migratory birds that connect the U.S. and Panama, visit the Bridging the Americas online teacher resources at www.s.si.edu/BTA.**

An Introduction to Panama

Area: 29,000 square miles (75,400 square kilometers; about the size of South Carolina)

Location: Panama is located in Central America, between Colombia and Costa Rica. It also borders the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean.

Population: 4.2 million (2018 est.)

Capital City: Panama City (metro population: 1,272,672)

Ethnic groups: mestizo 70%, Amerindian and mixed 14%, white 10%, Amerindian 6%

Languages: Spanish is the official language

Religion: Roman Catholic 85%, Protestant 15%

Government: Constitutional democracy

President: Juan Carlos Varela (next election May 2019)

Current environmental issues: air and water pollution; biodiversity loss; deforestation

Literacy rate: total population: 91.9%

Independence: 3 November 1903 (from Colombia; became independent from Spain on 28 November 1821)

National bird: Harpy eagle, locally known as "tocororo"

National flower: "Espíritu Santo" which means "Holy Spirit" (a type of orchid)



The Panamanian Flag and Coat of Arms



The Panamanian Coat of Arms prominently features the Harpy Eagle, the national bird of Panama. The Harpy Eagle, the strongest and most powerful eagle in the world, is depicted perched on the crest, holding a ribbon. The ribbon reads "Pro Mundi Beneficio" which is Latin for "For the Benefit of the World." Above the Harpy Eagle are nine stars, representing each of Panama's provinces. The isthmus is portrayed in the center and highlights the nation's unique geography uniting both land and sea. At the top left, the end to civil war is symbolized with a rifle at rest over a sword. Work and prosperity are symbolized to the right with a shovel and hoe. To the bottom left, wealth is depicted with a cornucopia and progress to the bottom right by a winged wheel.

Finally, the Panamanian flag is featured flanking the coat of arms. The flag was designed by María de la Ossa de Amador in 1903 and is associated with Panamanian independence from Colombia. Panama's Flag Day is celebrated November 4th, a day after Panama's Independence Day. The flag is divided into four quadrants: one white with a blue star, one solid blue, one solid red, and one white with a red star. The colors, red and blue, represent the Conservative and Liberal parties, respectively. White is the color that unites them. The blue star

symbolizes honesty and purity and the red star, authority and law. Together the stars represent the new republic.

Geography

The Republic of Panamá, which connects North and South America, has a relatively recent geologic history. Approximately three million years ago, tectonic movements and volcanic activity created the emergence of one narrow strip of land from the ocean floor. The resulting isthmus of Panama extends 480 miles (772 km) from east to west. This S-shaped band of land separated waters of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and united the continental masses of North and South America. The isthmus initiated a massive interchange of the flora and fauna between the continents, acting as a bridge that included the passage of humans who would later populate South America.

The Caribbean Sea borders Panama to the north, with 470 miles (760) km of coastline. The Pacific Ocean borders the country to the south, with 760 miles (1,225 km) of coastline. Panama is bordered by Costa Rica to the west and Colombia to the east and occupies 74,340 square kilometers (28,703 square miles), making it slightly smaller than South Carolina (74,949 sq km/28,950 sq mi).

Panama is divided into 9 provinces (Bocas del Toro, Chiriquí, Coclé, Colón,



Darien, Herrera, Los Santos, Panama, and Veraguas) and five indigenous territories (Embera, Kuna de Madugandí, Ngobe-Bugle, Kuna de Wargandí, and Kuna Yala). In addition, there are about 56 municipalities.

Panama's landscape consists of three major physical regions: mountains, coastal lowlands, and archipelagos. The dominant feature of the country's landform is the central spine of mountains and hills that extend almost the entire length of Panama, known as the *Cordillera Central*. The tallest peaks of this *cordillera* are found to the west, near the border with Costa Rica, and gradually decline in elevation as the range runs east toward the middle of Panama. The highest point in the country is the Barú Volcano, with a summit of 11,401 feet (3,475 meters) above sea level. Nearly 500 rivers flow across the length of Panama's rugged landscape. Mostly unnavigable, many originate as swift highland streams, meander in valleys, and form coastal deltas. Rio Chagres and Rio Chepo are the principal rivers of Panama.

Panama's extensive coastal lowlands make up more than 85 percent of Panama's total land area. The lowlands on the Pacific coast begin with the Chiriqui Gulf to the west, continuing east with the Azuero Peninsula jutting south to define the Gulf of Panama. The Atlantic lowlands along the Caribbean coast are very narrow. Several archipelagos line the coast, including the Archipiélago of Bocas del Toro near the Costa Rican border and the San Blas Islands to the east near Colombia. Like the Pacific lowlands, the Atlantic lowlands contain forest and farmland.

Panama's diverse island geography is unique. There are more than 1,500 islands forming several archipelagos in the Pacific and Caribbean territorial waters of Panama. Many of these islands are popular attractions for citizens and tourists alike. The *Archipiélago de las Perlas* (Pearl islands) includes a well-known resort island, Isla Contadora. *Isla de Coiba* (Coiba Island) is the largest island in Central America. It is a national park where many marine organisms are studied and is a destination for diving enthusiasts.

Climate

Panama has a tropical maritime climate, with uniform temperatures and humidity year-round. The average annual temperature in the lowlands is 80°F (27°C), while temperature in the highlands of Panama tend to be cooler with an average of 70° F (20° C). Seasons in Panama are not determined by temperature, but rather by precipitation. In most of Panama the dry season (known in Spanish as the *verano*, or "summer," due to the warmer temperature) runs from mid-December until late April. During the wet season, (known in Spanish as the *invierno*, or "winter") daily rainfall occurs frequently. Occasional day-long rains are most common during the rainiest months of October and November. Rainfall is heaviest on the Caribbean coast, with an average of 150 inches (381 centimeters) of rainfall every year, one of the highest rates in the world. There is often a one-to-four-week period in July and August, known as the *veranillo* (little summer), when rain becomes scarce. Although Panama may sometimes be affected by hurricane peripheral rains, it lies to the south of the main track of Caribbean hurricanes, and has not experienced a hurricane in more than 100 years.

Panama's Environment

Panama features a unique biodiversity largely due to its geography as a land bridge joining North and South America. The rugged topography and tropical climate provides variable habitats for the abundant animal and plant species in the country. Among animals, there are 225 mammal species, 143 species of amphibians, and 214 species of reptiles. Panama's diverse avifauna is especially impressive with an outstanding total of 995 bird species- more bird species than the entire continental United States and Canada combined, and more than any country in North America except Mexico, which is 26 times larger than Panama in area.

Vegetation is dominated by rain forests consisting of over 1,000 tree species. Abundant mangrove forests are found on both Pacific and Caribbean coasts. Though dense tropical rain forests once covered most of Panama, agriculture, lumber, mining, cattle grazing, and urbanization have reduced tree cover in the country by more than 50 percent. Today, only 32 percent of Panama's rain forests remain.

Deforestation continues to be the greatest environmental threat in Panama, destroying critical habitat for wildlife and contributing to climate change. To protect its natural heritage, Panama has established sixteen national parks, a dozen forest reserves, and ten wildlife sanctuaries. Altogether, the government is protecting about 29 percent of the country's land from development. The largest protected areas include La Amistad International Park, shared with Costa Rica to the west, and Darien National Park, located along the Colombian border.

History

The isthmus of Panama was settled by an estimated 500,000 indigenous people belonging to different tribes distributed across coastal lowlands, offshore islands, and along the river banks of rain forests. Three indigenous tribes, the Kuna on the Caribbean coast, the Chocó on the Pacific side, and the Guaymí of the highlands near the Costa Rican border, constituted the largest groups of the isthmus. Tribes lived in circular thatched huts on small independent villages, each ruled by a *cacique*, and cultivated corn, cotton, cacao, vegetables, fruits, and various root crops. Hunting and fishing were also very important for their survival. The indigenous people of Panama were skillful potters, stonecutters, goldsmiths, and silversmiths. Villages specialized in producing pottery, gold jewelry, and other goods, and participated in trade with larger indigenous civilizations, including the Aztecs. Dugout canoes allowed tribe members to travel long distances along the rivers and coastal waters, enabling them to flourish as successful merchants and traders. It is estimated that as many as sixty different tribes lived in Panama, but the prosperity they enjoyed would soon change with the arrival of European explorers.

Rodrigo de Bastidas, sailing westward from Venezuela in search of gold, was the first European to encounter the Isthmus of Panama in 1501. A year later, Christopher Columbus arrived to the isthmus on his fourth voyage to the New World. Several Spanish expeditions followed, and the village of Antigua (Santa Maria de la Antigua del Darien) became the first city to be duly constituted by the Spanish crown in 1510. Although Diego de Nicuesa and Alonso de Ojeda were the crown's representatives in Antigua, colonists rejected them as leaders and elected Vasco Núñez de Balboa as the mayor of Antigua. In an effort to verify the

existence of another ocean across the mountains spoken of by the indigenous people, Balboa led an expedition across the Isthmus of Panama in 1513, and became the first European to see the Pacific Ocean.

Spanish leaders soon realized that Panama was a valuable conduit to the Pacific Ocean. In 1519 the capital was moved from Antigua to a fishing village on the Pacific coast that the natives called Panama (present Panama City), meaning "abundance of fish." Panama City thrived as a slave market, and served as a staging ground for further explorations for riches and conquest expeditions. Trade items—including gold from the Inca Empire in Peru— were carried across an overland route that was built across the isthmus, linking Panama City to the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Panama quickly became the crossroads and marketplace of Spain's empire in the New World. However, economic decline followed as gold was exhausted from Peruvian mines, shipment assaults by buccaneers increased, and contraband trade wiped out legal trade.

Panama remained part of the Spanish empire for 300 years, until an independence movement, led by General Simon Bolivar (from Venezuela,) led to the defeat of the Spanish in his fight for Colombian independence in 1819. Panama declared its independence from Spain in 1821 and became part of the newly independent Republic of Gran Colombia, which included modern-day Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador. In 1830, the death of President and Liberator Simon Bolivar provoked the separation of the republics forming Gran Colombia, and contributed to political instability and corruption during the first decades of the newly formed republic. Even though Panama was unable to achieve independence and remained a Colombian province, the incursion of the United States into Panamanian territory in the early 1850's for the construction of a transcontinental railroad across the isthmus would play an important role in Panama's journey towards independence.

Panama's Geographic Destiny and the Panama Canal

Panama's key geographic location between North and South America and between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans has defined its past and modern history, shaping the identity and destiny of the isthmus. In the late 1800's, the dream of a

navigable canal across the Isthmus of Panama to create a direct path between the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans inspired the ambitions of the United States and France. In 1881, France began construction of the canal, modeled after the engineering of the Suez Canal, which operated at sea-level and without locks. Ferdinand de Lesseps led the operation, and construction proceeded through 1889. Ultimately, de Lesseps' lack of understanding of Panama's mountainous geography proved detrimental to construction efforts, and malaria and yellow fever outbreaks devastated the Canal Zone, killing thousands of workers. The bankrupt company suspended the project in 1889, and in 1894, France placed the canal project on the market in its current state of completion.

The U.S. remained interested in the construction of the Panama Canal and voted in favor of pursuing the excavation of the canal in 1902. Meanwhile, Colombia was in the midst of a civil war known as the Thousand Days' War (1899-1902), which left the Colombian government too preoccupied to fight the independence movement growing in Panama. In 1903, with military support from the United States Panama declared its independence. Soon after, the United States was granted access to construct and operate a canal in Panama according to the terms of the Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty.

Thorough planning both in infrastructure and engineering helped guarantee the success of the US-led effort to construct the Panama Canal beginning in 1904. Though laborers faced the same hazards as in the earlier years of construction, including yellow fever and malaria, chief sanitation officer William Gorgas successfully contained these epidemics by leading initiatives controlling mosquito populations and installing sewers and drainage systems.

The failure of de Lesseps' canal design underscored the necessity to involve Panama's geography in the engineering of the canal. Rather than a sea-level canal working against the landscape, a panel of engineers proposed using a lock system to raise and lower ships into the canal. The design required the construction of the Gatun Dam, which would create a lake providing the water required to operate the canal locks. Known as Gatun Lake, it is the largest man-made lake in the world. The Panama Canal was completed in 1914. The existing 50-mile (83 km) canal is considered one of the world's greatest engineering triumphs.

Troubled Government

Through 1968, Panama operated under a corrupt oligarchy. Panama struggled with its national identity under the Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty, and increasing pressure to renegotiate the treaty culminated in 1968 with a military coup against the oligarch government. Leading this effort was General Omar Torrijos Herrera, who ousted president Dr. Arnulfo Arias Madrid on the grounds that the newly elected president sought to initiate a dictatorship.

Torrijos' policies benefiting the poor won him widespread support. Torrijos instituted land reform, improved schools, health-care facilities, public works, and extended civil rights finally allowing blacks the right to vote and attend public school. In 1977, Torrijos successfully renegotiated treaties with the United States calling for a gradual takeover of the Canal Zone by Panama over a twenty-year period beginning in 1979.

Torrijos' sudden death in 1981 heightened the power of a group of military and civilian leaders known as the Panama Defense Force (PDF) that sought to continue military rule, yet alter the revolutionary tone and role of the military. Leading the PDF was General Manuel Noriega, who declared himself head of Panama's government in 1983. Though this military dictatorship originally held the support of the United States, this relationship quickly deteriorated due to conflict of interest involving guerilla movements in the region, including in Nicaragua. In December 1989, Noriega declared Panama to be in a state of war with the United States and President George H.W. Bush ordered the U.S. military into Panama to reinstate order, defend the canal, and defend democracy. The intervention had severe consequences on Panama's economy and displaced thousands of Panamanians. It would take the nation several years to recover from the corruption originally supported by the United States, and the eventual overthrow of the Noriega regime.

Rebuilding Democracy

Panama reestablished a civilian constitutional government shortly after Noriega's arrest; however Panama struggled throughout the 1990s to initiate effective measures to reassert its prior economic influence. In 1990, Panama

formed a new seventy-two-member Legislative Assembly and created a new civilian police force, coast guard, and air service. The political environment was intensely factious during this era, impeding progress towards a transparent government free of corruption. Ernesto Perez Balladares of the Revolutionary Democratic Party won the elections in 1994. As president, Perez Balladares initiated free-market policies and formed a closer alliance with the United States; however, the president was later implicated in illegal activities, including money laundering and illegal sale of US visas. In 1999, Perez Balladares was succeeded by Mireya Moscoso, widow of President Arnulfo Arias and the first woman to hold office. Like the presidents that preceded her, Moscoso's popularity faced a sharp decline due to government incompetency and corruption scandals. Panama was left with a crippled economy at the end of Moscoso's term.

Once again echoing Panama's political past, the son of Omar Torrijos Herrera, Martin Torrijos Espino, took office in 2004, promising to negotiate free-trade agreements with the United States, and to strengthen the economy. One of Torrijos Espino's most notable actions was the decision to widen the Panama Canal, thereby doubling its capacity. Candidate Ricardo Martinelli gained popular appeal in 2009, and won the presidential election decisively. Unlike previous candidates, Martinelli had no political family ties, and ran under the new Democratic Change Party. Under Martinelli, the free trade agreement between the US and Panama was ratified. Current president Juan Carlos Varela was elected in 2014 (next election is in May 2019).

Culture

Panama is a true melting pot of ethnic diversity. Its importance as a crossroads between two continents brought together many races and cultures over time. In the early 16th century, Spanish explorers intermarried with native people that were related to the Mayas of Guatemala and Mexico and Chibchas of Colombia. Their descendants are called Mestizos (mixed Spanish and Indian) and are the largest ethnic group in Panama, comprising 70 percent of the population. Panama's black population is the second largest ethnic group. Most arrived to

Panama with the Spanish conquistadors to work as slaves. The rest descended from slaves imported from the West Indies to build the Panama Railroad and the Panama Canal, or to work on the banana plantations. There is also a smaller white population in Panama, called *criollos*. Most are descendants of the Spanish Colonists, and their families have traditionally held the economic and political power in Panama. The dominant white class still shapes the country's economy to a great extent. People of East Indian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, and European heritage also live in modern-day Panama. Many of their ancestors arrived in Panama in the late 19th century.

In modern times, three major Indian groups still remain in Panama. The Guaymi is the largest group. They live in western Panama, Bocas del Toro, and Veraguas provinces. The Guaymi still live as farmers, raising crops on their own land, or as laborers on large banana and coffee plantations. The Guna people live in the San Blas Islands, where they maintain their own economic system, language, customs, and culture. The Embera Indians live in the province of Darien, selling craft items and agriculture. These remaining indigenous people represent Panama's heritage. The constitution protects their ethnic identity and language.

Sources

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CIA's "The World Factbook- *Central America and Caribbean: Panama*". (2018).

Seales, L. V. (2009). *Culture and Customs of Panama*. Greenwood Press.

Shields, C. (2003). *Panama*. Mason Crest Publishers.

Streissguth, T. (2005). *Panama in Pictures*. Lerner Publications Company. U.S.

Make the Dirt Fly! A Smithsonian Institution Libraries Exhibition.

<http://www.sil.si.edu/Exhibitions/Make-the-Dirt-Fly/>

Suggested resources on Panama

Books:

Panama-True Book Series by Dana Meachen Rau. 1999. Children's Press. **Grades 2-4.** (Simple summary of Panama's geography, history and culture.)

Panama (Enchantment of the World series) by Jean Blashfield. 2015. Children's Press. **Grades 4 and up.** Lexile measure 1020.

Is This Panama? A Migration Story by Jan Thornhill. 2013. Owlkids Books. **Grades 1-3.** Lexile 620L. (An imaginative tale about a Wilson's warbler on its first migration to Panama.)

Locks, Crocs, & Skeeters: The Story of the Panama Canal by Nancy Winslow Parker. 1996. Greenwillow Books. **Grades 3-4.** (an illustrated history).

Videos:

Destinos In Panama- **In Spanish**; a video tour of popular tourist destinations in Panama.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QG5W90BIeis>

This is America TV: Panama History and Culture

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gFf4qWy9Aw>

Traveling by Train in Panama- Documentary showing many scenes of modern day life from Panama City to Colon (the 2 end points of the canal)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDo1vIBqi10>

History of the Panama Canal: 44 minute video about the construction of the canal

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHcvwjwGdfo>

Web sites:

National Geographic Kids:

<https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/countries/panama/#panama-canal.jpg>

Photos on Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/search/?text=panama>

Learn about what it would be like to travel in Panama:

<https://www.anywhere.com/panama#explore>

Animation showing how the Panama Canal works:

<http://www.pancanal.com/eng/general/howitworks/index.html>