



Vegetation of East Asia

East Asia's vegetation is extraordinarily diverse. China, in fact, has the widest variety of vegetation of any nation in the world. Western China consists mostly of deserts or mountains. The Himalaya Mountains, which form China's border with the Indian subcontinent, are the highest mountains in the world. As one climbs in elevation, the vegetation changes from forests to wasteland. Similar vegetation patterns can be found in the northwest, where the Altai Mountains form China's border with Kazakhstan. Between these two mountain ranges lie the Turfan Depression, the Tibetan Highlands, and the Taklamakan Desert. Most of the vegetation there consists of desert scrub, steppe, or just plain wasteland. The same is true of the Gobi Desert, which lies to the east on the border of Mongolia and China. The vegetation of much of Mongolia and northern China is characterized by temperate grassland -- grassy plains, occasional shrubs, and few trees. At one time, eastern China consisted of coniferous or deciduous forests. Today, however, only 10% of China is forested with the most extensive forests found in the northeast. Population pressure and economic expansion has led to wide-scale deforestation over the last 200 years. Forests have given way to urbanization and the need for farmland. Japan and the Korean Peninsula are largely covered by deciduous and mixed deciduous forests. Latitude, elevation, and climate combine to create a great deal of variety in a region that appears to have only one type of vegetation. Japan, while heavily forested, does not have its original forests. Substantial population growth during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868) increased the demand for fuel and building materials, which resulted in wide-scale deforestation. The Tokugawa took preventive measures to protect and replant Japan's forests. While urbanization continues apace, Japan's forests remain intact due to peoples' unwillingness to live in the mountains or start a business there. Hokkaido, the least populated main island of Japan, has mostly coniferous forests.

MAP: Question 1

In what regions of China would you expect to find desert scrub and wasteland? Describe the region's climate.

Question 2

Judging from the kinds of vegetation found in China, what generalizations can you make about farming there?

Question 3

How is the natural vegetation of East Asia being altered by human development?