



Vegetation of Southwest Asia

Over three-fourths of the land that makes up the Middle East receives less than 10 inches of rain a year. Some nations are more than 90% desert! Deserts can be composed of sand, gravel, or rock. Rub al-Khali, the Empty Quarter in central Saudi Arabia, covers 25% of the Arabian Peninsula and is the world's largest sand dune area. The Syrian Desert is a mix of sand, rock, and limestone, while the desert in eastern Iran is a vast, uninhabitable salt flat. Vegetation varies from a virtual wasteland, where nothing grows, to desert scrub. Some parts of the desert, if properly irrigated, contain enough organic matter to support agriculture. Though most of the Arabian Peninsula is desert, there is a narrow coastal plain bordering the Red Sea. (The Hejaz Mountains, by trapping moisture from the Red Sea, provides water for this plain.) Because of the vast deserts (formed by the mountains) and unfavorable climate, finding freshwater is an ongoing-problem for the people and countries of the Middle East. Temperate grasslands make up the second largest type of natural vegetation in Southwest Asia. Grass is sustained by annual rainfall totals of less than 14 inches. Not surprisingly, many people in these regions make a living by raising livestock. The main concentration of deciduous and mixed deciduous forests can be found in northern Syria and Iraq, southern Turkey, and parts of western Iraq. This region has a Mediterranean climate, which is characterized by moderate temperatures, dry summers, and wet winters. The most productive farmland in Southwest Asia is found along the Mediterranean coast, and through the Fertile Crescent, which includes the forest region. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers originate in the mountains of Turkey and flow through Iraq to join (for the last hundred miles) as the Shatt al-Arab before emptying into the Persian Gulf. The land between the rivers is a large, fertile plain. Chaparral, or forests of short trees and dense shrubs, can be found along the western coast of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. Here, highlands and mountains block moisture from moving inland, which produces a great deal of precipitation along the coast.

MAP: Question 1

What is the most common kind of vegetation found on the Arabian Peninsula?

Question 2

What factors have contributed to the development of deserts in the Middle East?

Question 3

How have the Middle East's climate and vegetation shaped life in the region?