



Continent Close-up

North America is the third-largest

of Earth's seven continents. It stretches from the icy Arctic region in the north to tropical Panama in the south. The top of North America is very wide. But the bottom is a narrow strip of land that links North America to South America. At its narrowest,



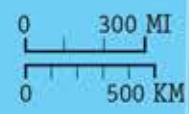
Ottawa, Canada

it measures only 30 miles (48 kilometers) across! North America includes Canada, the United States, Mexico, and seven small countries in Central America. Many islands are also part of the continent.

Land area	9.4 million square miles (24 million sq km)
Number of independent countries	23
Estimated population (2017)	579 million
Main languages	English, Spanish, French
Largest country	Canada
Smallest country	Saint Kitts and Nevis
Fast fact	Hawaii is a state in the United States, but it is technically not part of North America. Its islands are usually counted as part of the Oceania region.



Saint Kitts



Death Valley can sometimes go more than a year without receiving any rain.



CHAPTER



Land and Climate

Long ago, large parts of North America were covered in glaciers. As these giant ice sheets moved and melted, they helped shape the land. Today, North America has one of the most varied landscapes in the world. It has many different **climate** zones, too. In the far north, temperatures are below freezing for most of the year. But in southern parts of the continent, it can get so hot that people burn their feet if they try to walk barefoot.

Death Valley, California, is the hottest and driest spot on the whole continent.

THE **BIG** TRUTH!

Major Meltdown

North America has more land inside the Arctic Circle than any other continent. The Arctic Circle is an area of land that borders the Arctic Ocean. It is covered in ice for much of the year. But there is a problem. Earth's average temperature has been slowly rising. This warm-up is causing more and more Arctic sea ice to melt each summer. This diagram shows how this process takes place.

2 Ice in the ocean melts and shrinks.



3 Water soaks up heat from the sun better than ice does. So now the ocean gets even warmer.



1 Air and ocean temperatures rise. Scientists say one cause is the burning of oil and other fossil fuels to power cars and factories. This creates gases that trap the sun's heat close to Earth.



4 More ice melts.



5 The cycle continues. Over time, there is less space for animals, such as polar bears and walrus, which live on large chunks of ice. Higher ocean levels can also cause flooding in coastal areas around the world.

