CHAPTER 25

REGIONS OVER TIME

BENCHMARK:

Analyze the cultural, physical, economic, and political characteristics that define regions and describe reasons that regions change over time.

This benchmark and the accompanying grade level indicator ask students to analyze characteristics of regions and to explain how those characteristics change over time, as well as how perceptions of regions change. Regions include urban areas, wilderness, farmland, and centers of industry and technology. A *region* is defined as an area with one or more common characteristics or features, which give it a measure of homogeneity and make it different from surrounding areas.

★ REGIONS OF THE UNITED STATES ★

Geographers study how people live on and use the surface of the Earth. Regions help them conduct that ongoing study. There are many regions within the United States, and they are defined in many different ways. Regions differ greatly in size and kind. Often the borders of a region are indistinct, and they change over time.

Regions can be based on landforms (mountains, plateaus), relative location (Northeast, Southwest), where people live (urban, rural, suburban), topography (desert, wetlands), economy (farming, industrial), religion (Amish), economic specialization (Corn Belt, Silicon Valley), language or ethnic group (Chinese, Hispanic), or other characteristics. By subdividing our nation into various kinds of regions, we can better understand the United States as a whole.

Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs)

Other kinds of regions are characterized by their functions, such as school districts, cities, or counties. A Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) is another kind of region in this category. An MSA, according to the Census Bureau, consists of a central city with at least 50,000 people or more, the county that it is located in, and the surrounding counties in which jobs or commercial activity are linked significantly to the central city. The U.S. government currently lists 300 MSAs in the United States. Some are huge urban areas such as New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Others are centered around smaller cities such as Dayton-Springfield, Ohio, or Erie, Pennsylvania.

Test Yourself
How are regions determined?

Urban and Suburban Regions

The vast majority of people in the United States live in an MSA, but that has not always been the case. It was not until between 1910 and 1920 that the majority of the U.S. population lived in urban areas. In 1870, nearly 75 percent of Americans lived in rural areas and were engaged in agriculture or businesses that supported farmers. In 1890, the percentage of people living in rural areas had decreased to about 65 percent. The 1920 Census was the first to reveal that more people were living in cities—51 percent—than in rural areas. This change was due in large part to the tremendous influx of immigrants between 1880 and 1920, most of whom lived and worked in urban areas. As more and more people lived in or had contact with urban areas, their perceptions of cities also changed. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, many Americans considered cities dirty and dangerous places that were breeding grounds for sin, crime, and disease. As travel became more affordable and available, and as more people moved to cities for work, the nation's perception began to change. As the United States moved into the 20th century, cities increasingly became centers of industry, technology, transportation, education, and culture. Once seen as ugly and corrupt, cities gradually became not only home to thousands of former country residents but also tourist destinations for many. During the Gilded Age (roughly the end of Reconstruction—1877—to the turn of the century), many cities witnessed the birth of large, elegant, and expensive hotels that attracted people from all over the nation.

The Move to Suburbia. After World War II, cities underwent another kind of change. Many people abandoned center cities for green pastures in the suburbs. Although many people still worked in the city proper, improved transportation systems made it affordable and possible for middle-income earners to commute from suburban homes to their jobs. Developers built millions of single-family homes in large tracts of land that had recently been rural areas. Soldiers returning from World War II used a government program called the G.I. Bill of Rights, which provided benefits to U.S. military veterans, to purchase suburban homes and attend college.

Areas such as the suburbs around Los Angeles, California, soon became home for large numbers of Americans who wanted to own a house. In the years after World War II, the center city became home for African Americans and immigrants, groups that could not afford to live in suburban areas. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, many large cities suffered from declining tax revenues as people moved to the suburbs.

More recently, some cities have experienced a slight reversal of the trend toward suburbanization. Many cities have remained centers of culture and entertainment—with museums, theaters, and restaurants—to which younger people have returned. The substantial drop in crime in many large cities in the past two decades brought many people back. People have also returned to cities because of the high cost of suburban housing.

Farmland and Wilderness Regions

As urban and suburban areas grew, in a process sometimes referred to as *urban sprawl*, two other regions—wilderness areas and farmland—shrank. Especially in the years after World War II, when suburbanization accelerated, farmland increasingly fell victim to new housing tracts. In recent years, public concern over loss of farmland grew as urbanization and suburbanization appropriated more areas of fertile land. Some experts fear that this historical process could compromise the nation's capacity to produce food in the future. Many people have given up farming altogether. In 1981, a government study estimated that the amount of land converted from rural areas, usually farmland, to urban or suburban uses increased from about 1.1 million acres between 1958 and 1967 to over 2.3 million acres between 1967 and 1975. To make matters worse, much of this land was highly productive farmland. The problem is not simply that farmland is being converted to other uses. Another aspect of lost agricultural acreage is the kind of land that is being lost. Much of it is very fertile land that produced high crop yields.

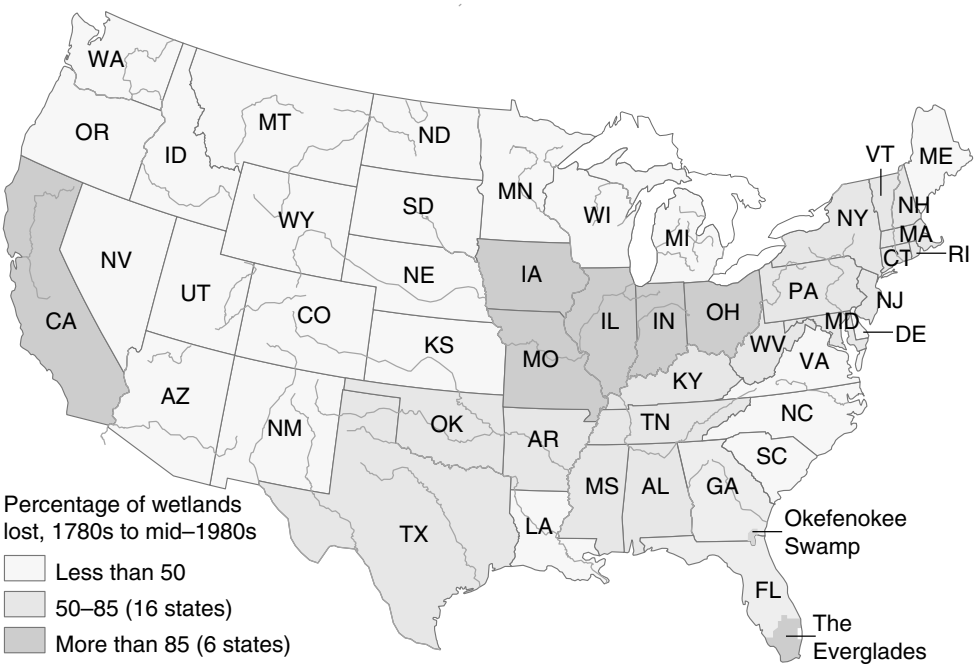
This concern is not limited to the United States. Population experts today estimate that by 2025, the world's population will top 8 billion, a 38 percent increase. The number of acres of cropland in production, however, has not been increasing. In fact, due to urbanization, agricultural acreage has declined all over the world, especially in areas of high population growth such as several African and Asian nations. Despite the decline of agricultural acreage, however, improved technology and farming techniques have increased food production.

Test Yourself

Why has farm acreage declined over the past few decades?

Wetlands. Wetlands (swampy or marshy areas) are a particular kind of wilderness or wildlife region that provide habitat for fish, birds, and several kinds of small animals. In the early years of the 20th century, the drainage of wetlands increased rapidly due to population growth and industrial development. Land was needed for factories and housing. Improved construction technology and engineering capabilities made huge water projects possible. These types of projects, such as the Mississippi River dam system, have detrimental effects on surrounding wetlands. The land along the Mississippi River consisted of swampy areas consisting of thousands of small islands. Ponds and lakes were scattered throughout wooded areas along the riverbank, and the river channel changed frequently. Dams were built to create a navigable river system, increasing the water depth behind each dam and creating a lake. One result of the dam system was that it eliminated large fluctuations in the river's depth and helped control flooding. The project eliminated some wetlands and created new ones. The entire project lasted nearly 25 years.

Urban and suburban growth also drained wetlands, as did some agricultural businesses such as the timber industry. Wetlands were also drained in several places to create land that could be cultivated. Developers and farmers,



The loss of wetlands in the United States

for example, dug some 400 miles of canals that drained large areas of the Everglades, a huge swamp in southern Florida.

In the 1960s, Congress passed legislation that encouraged and supported wetland drainage for reasons such as flood control, farmland expansion, and housing. In the 1970s, however, with the development of the environmental movement, awareness of the importance of wetlands and their destruction increased, as did attempts to protect them. Congress responded with legislation such as the Emergency Wetlands Resources Act (1986), which helped limit wetlands destruction. In many places, efforts have been made to restore some wetlands, and National Wildlife Refuges have replaced projects to drain swamps or marshes. One notable example of wetlands restoration is in the Everglades, where about 60 percent of the remaining wetlands have been protected. Wetland loss has decreased, but it has not been eliminated.

Test Yourself

What have been changes in the uses and destruction of wetlands?

Centers of Industry and Technology

Industrial centers have always been important regions in the United States, especially since the late 1800s. In recent years a new kind of region—a center of technology—has become significant to the U.S. economy. Thirty or 40 years ago, the technological revolution that resulted in the current information society based on computers and the Internet started in the area around Palo Alto,

California, now known as Silicon Valley. Stanford University in Palo Alto needed to raise money, so it leased part of the university to several technology companies. This was the beginning of the high-tech revolution. In 1971, Don C. Hoefler, a journalist, first coined the term "Silicon Valley." In that same year, Intel developed the first microprocessor, the computer chip. In 1976, Apple Computer produced the first personal computer, which helped introduce and popularize the new machines to ordinary people.

As the high-tech and Internet revolution advanced throughout the 1980s and 1990s, similar companies created centers of technology in other parts of the United States, such as Seattle, Washington; Portland, Oregon; Austin, Texas; Phoenix, Arizona; Boston, Massachusetts; and areas in the Midwest. High-tech regions can now be found in virtually every part of the United States.

The Rust Belt and the Sun Belt

Silicon Valley is an economic region. Another economic region is an industrial area that became known as the Rust Belt. Located in the midwestern United States, it consisted primarily of all or part of the states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois. For many years, this area was the industrial hub of the United States, featuring steel mills, automobile factories, and many other heavy industries. Economic problems such as foreign competition, a shift from manufacturing to service industries, and aging buildings and equipment led to decline of Rust Belt industries. Many factories closed down, and many people who lost their jobs left the area looking for work elsewhere. The term *Rust Belt* became used in reference to the rusting machinery and abandoned plants that remained from more prosperous times. Many Rust Belt cities have revived, due in large part to the introduction of new service industries, high-tech companies, and other enterprises.

When people fled the Rust Belt in the 1970s, they often moved south or west to states such as California, Arizona, Texas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Many manufacturing companies moved their operations to take advantage of the better weather, fewer labor unions, lower taxes, and reduced labor costs. Many retirees also moved to the *Sun Belt*, as this region became known, to take advantage of the climate and lower costs of

The Rust Belt

The Sun Belt

living. As a result, the Sun Belt states gained electoral votes and have become more important in the U.S. political scene.

Test Yourself

How did the Rust Belt and the Sun Belt get their names?

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Regions are defined in many ways, using different characteristics.
- Most Americans today live in a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA).
- A higher percentage of Americans lived in rural areas until around 1920.
- The general perception of cities has improved since the 1800s.
- The process of suburbanization increased after World War II, largely due to improved and affordable transportation.
- Recently, there has been a slight reversal of suburbanization.
- As cities and suburbs have grown, farmland areas have decreased.
- The number of wetlands also decreased after World War II.
- Recent legislation has helped to slow the loss of wetlands.
- The technological revolution that started in the 1970s fostered the development of high-tech regions throughout the United States.
- Many people left the Rust Belt in the 1970s to find work in Sun Belt states.

EXERCISES

CHECKING WHAT YOU HAVE READ

1. Why do geographers categorize places into regions?
2. What has been the most significant population change in the United States since the late 1800s?
3. What made the process of suburbanization possible in the United States?
4. What factors have influenced people to move back to cities?
5. How did the building of the Mississippi River dam system affect wetlands?

USING WHAT YOU HAVE READ

Assume the role of a public relations or marketing professional hired by an association of retirement centers in the Sun Belt states. Design a brochure that is intended to convince people to move from Rust Belt states to your retirement communities. Include both textual and visual elements. Make sure it provides reasons why people would want to move to the Sun Belt.

THINKING ABOUT WHAT YOU HAVE READ

Imagine you are watching a debate on a cable news station between an environmental activist and a commercial developer over the issue of wetlands. Based on what you have read in this chapter and from other sources such as the media and the Internet, list the arguments that the activist and the developer are likely to make on a separate piece of paper. Is it possible for them to compromise and reach a jointly beneficial solution? If so, explain how.

SKILLS

Critiquing Evidence Used to Support a Thesis

Read the article about urban sprawl from *USA Today* (August 28, 2003) and then answer the questions that follow.

Studies Tie Urban Sprawl to Health Risks, Road Danger

People living in sprawling American neighborhoods walk less, weigh more and are more likely to be hit by a car if they do venture out on foot or bicycle, suggests a series of studies out Friday.

Driving everywhere adds up on Americans' waistlines, and can be dangerous for their health. The studies are among the first reports to link shopping centers, a lack of sidewalks and bike trails, and other features of urban sprawl to deadly health problems. The studies appear in the September issues of the *American Journal of Health Promotion* and the *American Journal of Public*

Health. These reports come as more and more Americans are moving out to the suburbs—and walking less and less. Studies by the Federal Highway Administration show that Americans make fewer than 6 percent of daily trips on foot.

In the first report, Reid Ewing, a researcher at the University of Maryland, and his colleagues studied more than 200,000 Americans living in 448 counties in major metropolitan areas. The team assessed the degree of sprawl in each county and then looked at some key health characteristics. Team members found that people who lived in sprawling neighborhoods walked less and had less chance to stay fit.

These neighborhoods were built to accommodate cars and SUVs, not walkers, says Richard Jackson of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. People living in urban sprawl often can't walk because the shops are miles away, often in strip malls accessible only by high-speed roadways, he says.

Ewing's study shows that everyday driving trips to the store or to the corner bus stop can add up. People in sprawling neighborhoods weighed about six pounds more on average than the folks living in compact neighborhoods, where sidewalks are plentiful and stores and shops are close to residential areas.

The report also shows that people living in sprawling urban areas were more likely to suffer from obesity, which can put people at higher risk of cancer, diabetes, and a host of other diseases. Urban sprawl also put residents at a slightly higher risk of developing high blood pressure.

A second study, by John Pucher at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., suggests that urban sprawl poses another health hazard: It's dangerous to walk or bike in areas where cars rule the road. He found that American cyclists and pedestrians were two to six times more likely to be killed on the road than their German or Dutch counterparts. He says American cities could remedy that hazard by putting in more car-free zones, sidewalks and bike paths.

Some developers now sell planned communities with walking and biking paths. The Urban Land Institute, a group for developers and planners, says 5 percent to 15 percent of new development is designed with pedestrians in mind. If Americans don't get out of the car and walk more, experts worry that epidemic of obesity and disease will just get worse.

"What we're talking about are diseases that will become rampant among the baby boomers," Jackson says. "We've got to build neighborhoods that work for people." (From *USA Today*, a division of Gannett Co., Inc. Reprinted with permission.)

—By Kathleen Fackelmann

1. What is the thesis of the article?

2. What statistical evidence is used to support the thesis?

3. What is the source of each statistic?

4. How credible do you think these sources and statistics are? Explain why.

5. Do you think the author used credible sources to support the thesis of the article? Why or why not?