

Oceania

AN OVERVIEW

Oceania encompasses Australia, the world's smallest continent, and the Pacific Islands, consisting of some 25,000 islands in more than 20 nations and territories. Australia alone has an area of 2,967,892 square miles (7,686,850 square kilometers), while the Pacific Islands have a combined land area of just 312,551 square miles (809,504 square kilometers) scattered across millions of square miles of ocean.

The Pacific Islands typically are divided into three areas. In the southeast lies Polynesia ("many islands"), sometimes referred to as the Polynesia Triangle, with Hawaii in the north, New Zealand in the southwest, and Easter Island in the southeast. Island groups inside this triangle include French Polynesia, the Cook Islands, Samoa, and Tonga. Melanesia ("black islands") extends east from Papua New Guinea through the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, and Fiji. Micronesia ("tiny islands") includes the smaller islands to the north: the Caroline Islands (Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia), the Marshall Islands, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Nauru, and Kiribati.

While some of the Pacific Islands have rugged, volcanic terrain with high elevations, other islands and atolls rise just above sea level. The Pacific Islands generally have a tropical climate with little seasonal variation in temperature. Periodically, the region is subject to destructive hurricanes, and some argue that global warming and rising ocean levels threaten low-lying islands. The landscape of Aus-

tralia varies from temperate coastal forests to a vast, inhospitable interior desert.

Evidence suggests that Pacific Islanders are descended from Austronesian peoples in Southeast Asia who arrived thousands of years ago. The population is mostly rural; many people still depend on subsistence agriculture and fishing. By contrast, Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii are more industrialized and have larger urban populations than the rest of Oceania. Australia's Aborigines and New Zealand's Maoris are the indigenous inhabitants of these two nations but have become minorities due to European colonization and migration. Native Hawaiians have also become a minority population due to Euro-American colonization and the migration of Asians. Pacific Islanders speak more than 1,200 languages, although English and French are the official languages of many nations, a legacy of their colonial past. Because of efforts by early missionaries, most Pacific Islanders are now Christians, but indigenous religions remain important. Modern Oceania faces a number of daunting challenges, including limited resources, difficult post-colonial transitions, lack of economic opportunities, and ethnic conflict. Some inhabitants of the region see an increasingly interconnected world as a solution to these problems, while others view it as a threat to their local traditions and lifestyles.

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