

Central America and the Caribbean

CHAPTER

11

SECTION 1

CENTRAL AMERICA

TEXT SUMMARY

Central America is an **isthmus**, a narrow strip of land connecting two larger land areas. The larger areas are the continents of North America and South America.

In 1914, the Panama Canal opened. It allowed ships to cross the isthmus and travel between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Ships no longer had to travel around the tip of South America.

Seven small countries make up Central America (see map). There are three major landforms—mountains, the Caribbean lowlands, and the Pacific coastal plain. Each region has a different climate. The rugged mountains, the core of the region, are difficult to cross and have caused transportation problems.

Central America's population includes Indians, Europeans (mostly Spanish), mestizos, and people of African descent. Most Central Americans are poor farmers with little political power. The wealthiest people, Europeans and mestizos, are mainly plantation owners. They dominate government in the region. There is a small but growing middle class.

Central America is made up of seven small countries.

Armed conflicts have been part of Central America's history. A shortage of farmland is one cause of unrest. Another cause is that governments mainly serve the interests of the wealthy. People opposed to those governments have sometimes organized **guerrilla** movements, armed forces outside the regular army. Guerrillas often fight in small bands against the government-controlled army. Cease-fires in several countries have brought hopes of peace.

THE BIG IDEA

Central America has many landscapes and climates. Most people are poor farmers, but power is held by a small number of very rich people. This has led to violent political conflicts.

GRAPHIC SUMMARY: Central America



REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the main occupation of most people in Central America?
2. **Map Skills** Which five countries of Central America border both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea?