

Geography

Location: continent mostly south of the Antarctic Circle

Map references: Antarctic Region

Area:

total area: 14 million sq km (est.)

land area: 14 million sq km (est.)

comparative area: slightly less than 1.5 times the size of the US

note: second-smallest continent (after Australia)

Land boundaries: none, but see entry on International disputes

Coastline: 17,968 km

Maritime claims: none, but see entry on International Disputes

International disputes: Antarctic Treaty defers claims (see Antarctic Treaty Summary below); sections (some overlapping) claimed by Argentina, Australia, Chile, France (Adelie Land), New Zealand (Ross Dependency), Norway (Queen Maud Land), and UK; the US and most other nations do not recognize the territorial claims of other nations and have made no claims themselves (the US reserves the right to do so); no formal claims have been made in the sector between 90 degrees west and 150 degrees west

Climate: severe low temperatures vary with latitude, elevation, and distance from the ocean; East Antarctica is colder than West Antarctica because of its higher elevation; Antarctic Peninsula has the most moderate climate; higher temperatures occur in January along the coast and average slightly below freezing

Terrain: about 98% thick continental ice sheet and 2% barren rock, with average elevations between 2,000 and 4,000 meters; mountain ranges up to 4,897 meters high; ice-free coastal areas include parts of southern Victoria Land, Wilkes Land, the Antarctic Peninsula area, and parts of Ross Island on McMurdo Sound; glaciers form ice shelves along about half of the coastline, and floating ice shelves constitute 11% of the area of the continent

Natural resources: none presently exploited; iron ore, chromium, copper, gold, nickel, platinum and other minerals, and coal and hydrocarbons have been found in small, uncommercial quantities

Land use:

arable land: 0%

permanent crops: 0%

meadows and pastures: 0%

forest and woodland: 0%

other: 100% (ice 98%, barren rock 2%)

Irrigated land: 0 sq km

Environment:

current issues: in October 1991 it was reported that the ozone shield, which protects the Earth's surface from harmful ultraviolet radiation, had dwindled to the lowest level recorded over Antarctica since 1975 when measurements were first taken

natural hazards: katabatic (gravity-driven) winds blow coastward from the high interior; frequent blizzards form near the foot of the plateau; cyclonic storms form over the ocean and move clockwise along the coast; volcanism on Deception Island and isolated areas of West Antarctica; other seismic activity rare and weak

international agreements: NA

Note: the coldest, windiest, highest, and driest continent; during summer more solar radiation reaches the surface at the South Pole than is received at the Equator in an equivalent period; mostly uninhabitable