

Physical Systems Vocabulary

Alluvial Plains – flat or gently sloping surface created by sediments left by flowing water. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Altitude – the distance above sea level. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Atmosphere – layers of gases surrounding a planet or celestial body. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Avalanches – large mass of snow and other material suddenly and quickly tumbling down a mountain. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Biomass – living organisms, and the energy contained within them. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Biome – area of the planet which can be classified according to the plant and animal life in it. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Biosphere – part of Earth where life exists. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Canyons – deep, narrow valley with steep sides. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Carbon cycle – series of processes in which carbon atoms circulate through Earth's land, ocean, atmosphere, and interior. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Cirque – half-open, amphitheater-like hollow area near the head of a valley or mountainside resulting from glacial erosion. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Climate – all weather conditions for a given location over a period of time. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Climograph – a graphic depiction of the monthly precipitation (bar graph) and temperatures (line graph) for a certain place. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Convergent Boundary – area where two or more tectonic plates bump into each other; also called a collision zone. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Coral reef – rocky ocean features made up of millions of coral skeletons. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Coriolis Effect – see video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2mec3vgeaI>

Deciduous – type of plant that sheds its leaves once a year. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Delta – the flat, low-lying plain that sometimes forms at the mouth of a river from deposits of sediments. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Deposition – process of silt and sediment building up in an area. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Desert – area of land that receives no more than 25 centimeters (10 inches) of precipitation a year. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Divergent Boundary – area where two or more tectonic plates are moving away from each other; also called an extensional boundary. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Earthquake – the sudden shaking of Earth’s crust caused by the release of energy along fault lines or from volcanic activity. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Ecosystem – community and interactions of living and nonliving things in an area. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

El Niño – irregular, recurring weather system that features a warm, eastern-flowing ocean current in the eastern Pacific Ocean. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Equator – imaginary line around the Earth, another planet, or star running east-west, 0 degrees latitude. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Equatorial – having to do with the equator or the area around the equator. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Estuary – mouth of a river where the river’s current meets the sea’s tide. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Food chain – group of organisms linked in order of the food they eat, from producers to consumers, and from prey, predators, scavengers, and decomposers. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Grassland – ecosystem with large, flat areas of grasses. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Hemisphere – half a sphere; cartographers and geographers, by convention, divide Earth into the Northern and Southern Hemispheres at the equator and the Eastern and Western Hemispheres at the prime meridian (longitude 0°) and 180° meridian. (National Geography Standards, 2012)

Hydrosphere – the water realm of Earth, which includes water contained in the oceans, lakes, rivers, ground, glaciers, and water vapor in the atmosphere. (National Geography Standards, 2012)

Kettle lake – shallow lake formed by a retreating glacier. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Landform – specific natural feature on the Earth’s surface. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Landslide – the fall of rocks, soil, and other materials from a mountain, hill, or slope. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Latitude – distance north or south of the Equator, measured in degrees. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

La Niña – weather system that includes cool ocean temperatures in the eastern Pacific Ocean. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Leeward – downwind, or facing away from prevailing winds. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Lithosphere – outer, solid portion of the Earth; also called the geosphere. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Mass Wasting – downward movement of rock, soil, and other material. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Mesa – broad, flat-topped landform with steep sides. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Monsoon – seasonal change in the direction of the prevailing winds of a region; monsoon usually refers to the winds of the Indian Ocean and South Asia, which often bring heavy rains. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Moraine – ridge composed of an unsorted mixture of boulders, sand, silt, and clay that is deposited in contact with a glacier; usually reflect a period when the glacier has remained stationary as opposed to advancing or retreating. (National Geography Standards, 2012)

Mountains – high elevation landform features composed mostly of steep slopes and large amounts of local relief within a specified area. (National Geography Standards, 2012)

North Atlantic Drift – warm ocean current that travels north along the northwestern coast of Europe. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Orographic Precipitation – produced when moist air is lifted as it moves over a mountain range; as the air rises and cools, orographic clouds form and serve as the source of the precipitation, most of which falls upwind of the mountain ridge. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014)

Photosynthesis – process by which plants turn water, sunlight, and carbon dioxide into water, oxygen, and simple sugars. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Plain – flat, smooth area at a low elevation. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Precipitation – all forms in which water falls to Earth from the atmosphere. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Rain shadow – areas on leeward sides of mountain ranges characterized by much lower precipitation and humidity than the windward (rainy) side. (National Geography Standards, 2012)

Ring of Fire – horseshoe-shaped string of volcanoes and earthquake sites around edges of the Pacific Ocean. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Sand dune – mound of sand created by the wind. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Savanna – type of tropical grassland with scattered trees. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Season – period of the year distinguished by special climatic conditions (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Soil – unconsolidated material found at the surface of Earth that is divided into layers (or horizons) characterized by the accumulation or loss of organic and inorganic compounds. Soil types and depths vary greatly over Earth's surface and are influenced by climate, organisms, rock type, local relief, time, and human activity. (National Geography Standards, 2012)

Tectonic plate – sections of Earth's rigid crust that move as distinct units on a plastic-like mantle on which they rest. As many as twenty different plates have been identified, but only seven are considered to be major. (National Geography Standards, 2012)

Transform Boundary – site of tectonic plates sliding next to each other in opposite directions. Also called a transform fault. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Tropic of Cancer – latitude 23.5 degrees north; the farthest north the sun is directly overhead during the year, usually June 22. (National Geography Standards, 2012)

Tropic of Capricorn – latitude 23.5 degrees south; the farthest south the sun is directly overhead during the year, usually December 22. (National Geography Standards, 2012)

Tundra – cold, treeless region in Arctic and Antarctic climates. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Valley

Volcano – an opening in the Earth’s crust, through which lava, ash, and gases erupt, and also the cone built by eruptions. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Water cycle – movement of water between atmosphere, land, and ocean. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Water vapor – molecules of liquid water suspended in the air. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Weathering – the breaking down, disintegration, or dissolving of Earth’s surface and subsurface rocks and minerals by physical, chemical, and organic compounds. (NatGeo Education, 2014)

Windward – facing or toward the wind. (NatGeo Education, 2014).