



Physiographic Region Descriptions

Teacher Instructions

Cut out and read the following descriptions of the five major physiographic regions of the Potomac River watershed to the class. Lead the class in voting on which descriptions best match the regions identified in the “Elevation and Physiographic Regions of the Potomac River Watershed” map. Tape up the correct region beside the map projected on the wall.

The correct responses are:

Region #1: Appalachian Plateau
Region #2: Valley and Ridge
Region #3: Blue Ridge
Region #4: Piedmont
Region #5: Coastal Plain
Boundary Feature: Fall Line



Photo courtesy of Ed Neville

Region #1

This physiographic region is high, rocky, and dense with forest. Its rugged terrain, infertile soil, and cool temperatures make it unfavorable for agriculture, but the area is known for its coal mining. The **headwaters** of the North and South Branch of the Potomac and the Cacapon River (all **tributaries** of the Potomac River) flow from this region.

Due to its rough terrain, this region was the last major transportation barrier for colonists traveling west to settle in the 1700s and 1800s.



Region #2

As its name suggests, this physiographic region is characterized by roughly parallel ridges and lowland valleys, which stretch from northeast to southwest.

The ridges are composed primarily of hard rock. Over time, water **eroded** the softer layers of rock between the ridges to carve deep valleys. The Great Valley includes the Shenandoah and parts of Cumberland Valley, and is

composed mostly of limestone. It has many caves.

This physiographic region is fairly dry because rain clouds are blocked from the west by the Appalachian **Plateau** and from the east by the Blue Ridge Mountains.



Physiographic Region Descriptions (con't)



Photo courtesy of Douglas Graham

Region #3

This physiographic region is a long, high ridge at the eastern edge of the Appalachian Mountains. Because of its elevation, this region hosts some of the most diverse ecosystems in the country. Much of the region is protected parkland, composed of dense forests.

The Potomac River and the Shenandoah River converge in this area at Harpers Ferry, where they have carved a rare gap through the mountains. This gap was used to settle the Shenandoah and Cumberland Valleys. One of the earliest

frontier towns, Harpers Ferry facilitated movement westward that was impeded elsewhere along the East Coast by the Blue Ridge Mountains.



Photo courtesy of Ed Neville

Region #4

The rolling uplands of this physiographic region are very fertile. The area is characterized by thick soils, streams at regular intervals, and deep layers of **sedimentary rock**.

When European settlers arrived here in the 1700s, they encountered trees with massive trunks, ideal for making ships and other timber products.

From the time it was settled to present day, this region has been farmed intensively. Today, because its **topography** is ideal for transportation corridors, parts of it are being developed at a rapid pace.



Physiographic Region Descriptions (con't)



Region #5

Over millions of years, as the Potomac River and other East Coast rivers eroded mountains, they carried sediment and deposited it at their mouths. These deposited sediments created this physiographic region.

Also known as the Tidewater, this region is almost completely flat and sits atop soft rocks. Over time, erosion has carved dramatic inlets and winding tongues that today characterize the Chesapeake Bay. The region is composed primarily of wetlands and fertile agriculture lands.



Photo courtesy of Emmy Truckenmiller

Boundary Feature

This boundary marks the abrupt transition from the hard rock of the Piedmont to the softer rock of the Coastal Plains. Over time, this drastic **geologic** feature has resulted in the creation of dramatic waterfalls.

More importantly, this boundary denotes a drop in elevation to sea level, where free-flowing rivers become **tidal estuaries**.

It stretches from Richmond, Virginia, to Baltimore, Maryland. These two cities, as well as Washington, D.C., developed naturally along this boundary as ports. Accessible from the Atlantic Ocean, these ports allowed

for the easy movement of goods as far west as possible before requiring land transportation, such as railroads.
