

Freshwater

Lake Baikal, located in southern Russia, is the deepest lake in the world, reaching a depth of 1,620 meters (5,315 feet). The lake contains 20 percent of the world's unfrozen freshwater, making it the largest reservoir on Earth. It is also the world's oldest lake, at 25 million years old.

The Yangtze is the longest river in Asia and the third longest in the world (behind the Amazon of South America and the Nile of Africa). Reaching 6,300 kilometers (3,915 miles) in length, the Yangtze moves east from the glaciers of the Tibetan Plateau to the river's mouth on the East China Sea. The Yangtze is considered the lifeblood of China. It drains one-fifth of the country's land area, is home to one-third of its population, and contributes greatly to China's economy.

The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers begin in the highlands of eastern Turkey and flow through Syria and Iraq, joining in the city of Qurna, Iraq, before emptying into the Persian Gulf. The land between the two rivers, known as Mesopotamia, was the center of the earliest civilizations, including Sumer and the Akkadian Empire. Today, the Tigris-Euphrates river system is under threat from increased agricultural and industrial use. These pressures have caused desertification and increased salts in the soil, severely damaging local watershed habitats.

Saltwater

The Persian Gulf has an area of more than 234,000 square kilometers (90,000 square miles). It borders Iran, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iraq.

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The gulf is subject to high rates of evaporation, making it shallow and extremely salty. The seabed beneath the Persian Gulf contains an estimated 50 percent of the world's oil reserves. The countries that border the gulf have engaged in a number of disputes over this rich resource.

The Sea of Okhotsk covers 1.5 million square kilometers (611,000 square miles) between the Russian mainland and the Kamchatka Peninsula. The sea is largely frozen between October and March. Large ice floes make winter navigation almost impossible.

The Bay of Bengal is the largest bay in the world, covering almost 2.2 million square kilometers (839,000 square miles) and bordering Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Burma. Many large rivers, including the Ganges and Brahmaputra, empty into the bay. The briny wetlands formed by the Ganges-Brahmaputra on the Bay of Bengal is the largest delta in the world.

Terrestrial Flora and Fauna

Botanists nickname China the "Mother of Gardens." It has more flowering plant species than North and South America combined. Because China has such diverse landscapes, from the arid Gobi Desert to the tropical rain forests of Yunnan Province, many flowers can adapt to climates all over the world. From roses to peonies, many familiar flowers most likely originated in northern China. China is the likely origin of such fruit trees as peaches and oranges. China is also home to the dawn redwood, the only redwood tree found outside North America.

Asia's diverse physical and cultural landscape has dictated the way animals have been domesticated. In the Himalayas, communities use yaks as beasts of burden. Yaks are large animals related to cattle, but with a thick fiber coat and the ability to survive in the oxygen-poor high altitude of the mountains. Yaks are not only used for transportation and for pulling plows, but their coats are sources of warm, hardy fiber. Yak milk is used for butter and cheese.

In the Mongolian steppe, the two-humped Bactrian camel is the traditional beast of burden. Bactrian camels are critically endangered in the wild. The camel's humps store nutrient-rich fat, which the animal can use in times of drought, heat, or frost. Its size and ability to adapt to hardship make it an ideal pack animal. Bactrians can actually outrun horses over long distances. These camels were the traditional animals used in caravans on the Silk Road, the legendary trade route linking eastern Asia with India and the Middle East.

Aquatic Flora and Fauna

The freshwater and marine habitats of Asia offer incredible biodiversity.

Lake Baikal's age and isolation make it a unique biological site. Aquatic life has been able to evolve for millions of years relatively undisturbed, producing a rich variety of flora and fauna. The lake is known as the "Galápagos of Russia" because of its importance to the study of evolutionary science. It has 1,340 species of animals and 570 species of plants.

Hundreds of Lake Baikal's species are endemic, meaning they are found nowhere else on Earth. The Baikal seal, for instance, is one of the few freshwater seal species in the world. The Baikal seal

feeds primarily on the Baikal oil fish and the omul. Both fishes are similar to salmon, and provide fisheries for the communities on the lake.

The Bay of Bengal, on the Indian Ocean, is one of the world's largest tropical marine ecosystems. The bay is home to dozens of marine mammals, including the bottlenose dolphin, spinner dolphin, spotted dolphin, and Bryde's whale. The bay also supports healthy tuna, jack, and marlin fisheries.

Some of the bay's most diverse array of organisms exist along its coasts and wetlands. Many wildlife reserves in and around the bay aim to protect its biological diversity.

The Sundarbans is a wetland area that forms at the delta of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. The Sundarbans is a huge mangrove forest. Mangroves are hardy trees that are able to withstand the powerful, salty tides of the Bay of Bengal as well as the freshwater flows from the Ganges and Brahmaputra. In addition to mangroves, the Sundarbans is forested by palm trees and swamp grasses.

The swampy jungle of the Sundarbans supports a rich animal community. Hundreds of species of fish, shrimp, crabs, and snails live in the exposed root system of the mangrove trees. The Sundarbans supports more than 200 species of aquatic and wading birds. These small animals are part of a food web that includes wild boar, macaque monkeys, monitor lizards, and a healthy population of Bengal tigers.