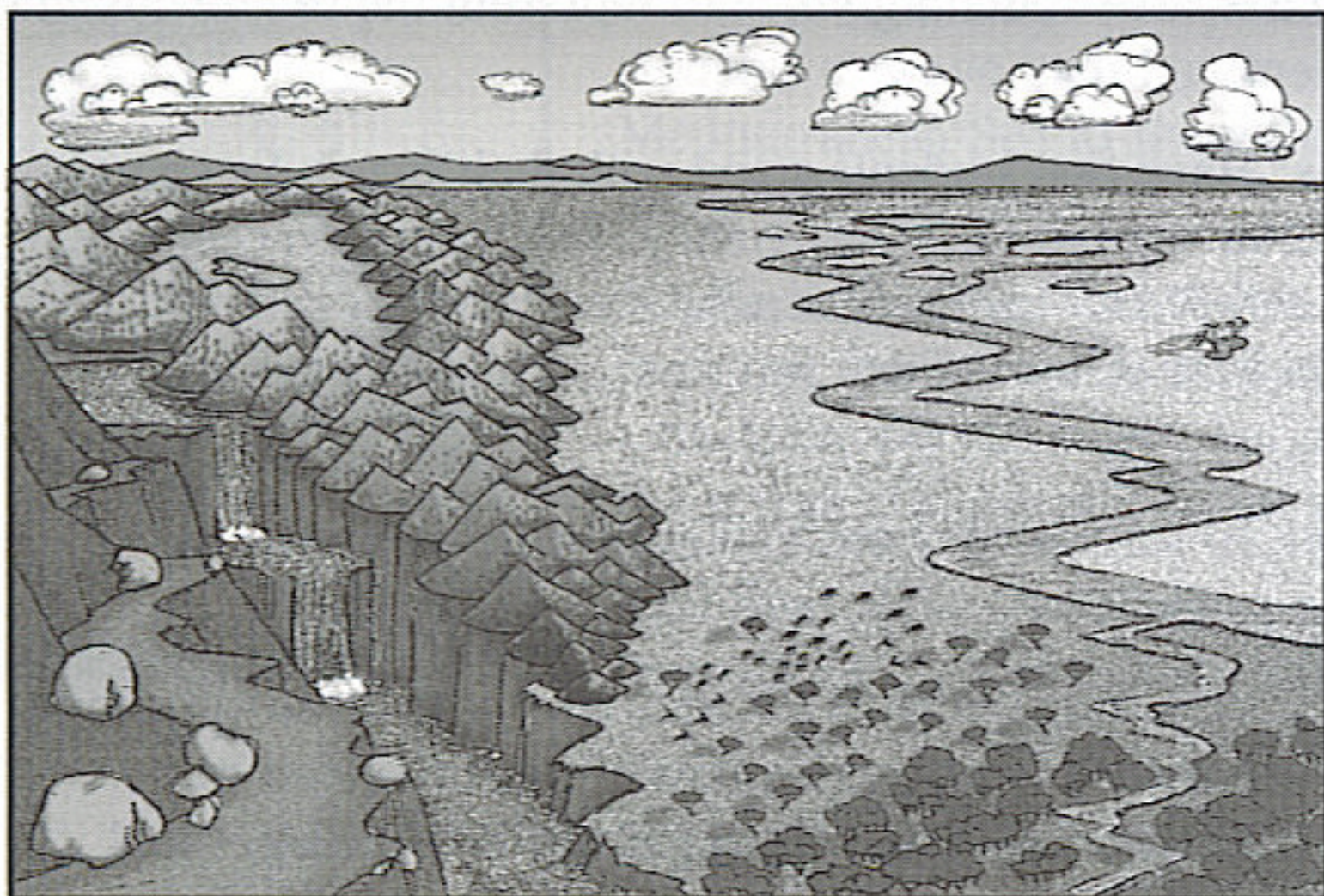


Information About Environmental Factors



Since ancient times, humans have considered many factors when deciding where to settle. Some of the most important factors are the natural characteristics of a region, such as water, topography, minerals, and vegetation. Geographers, or people who study the surface of the earth, sometimes call such characteristics “environmental factors.”

Environmental factors affect where humans settle and how they live.

Water is the environmental factor that has the greatest influence on whether or not a human settlement will thrive. Humans must have a reliable supply of safe drinking water to survive. To provide for this need, most human settlements are built near freshwater sources, such as lakes and rivers. Water is also important to a community because it can act as a source of food and transportation. Since prehistoric times, humans have included in their diet fish and waterfowl, such as ducks and geese. Many inland cities use rivers as “highways” to connect them with other cities located on seacoasts miles away.

Topography, or the natural shape of the land, is another environmental factor that greatly affects human settlement. For the most part, humans prefer to settle in flat, fertile (productive) areas, such as plains or valleys. This is because plains and valleys provide large open spaces for farming. Humans have settled in deserts and mountainous regions, but usually these landforms act as natural barriers that make travel difficult.

Minerals are sometimes called the “hidden” environmental factor, since they are often found below the earth’s surface. Minerals are natural substances that are usually found in mountainous regions. Some of the most well-known minerals are gold, silver, iron, copper, and tin. Humans use minerals to improve the quality of their lives. For example, minerals can be molded into coins or used to create tools and weapons.

In contrast to minerals, *vegetation* is a visible environmental factor. Humans use grasses, plants, and trees as sources of food, tools, and building materials. The variety of plant life can vary dramatically from region to region depending on the climate. For this reason, humans typically avoid settling in regions with harsh climates, such as deserts where plant life is scarce. Most human settlements are found in moderate climate regions where there is predictable rainfall and a variety of plant life.