Where do most Australians Live?

Australians live on the smallest continent and in the sixth largest country on Earth. With a population of 23 million and an area of 7,690,000 square kilometres, our population density is 2.9 people per square kilometre. We may think of ourselves as an outback-loving, farming nation, but we mostly live near the coast.

Why do Australians live where we do?

Most Australians currently live within a narrow coastal strip which extends from Brisbane in the north to Adelaide in the south. Over 80 per cent of Australians live in towns that have more than 100 residents and are located within 50 kilometres of the coast. Australians love the beach, but is it just a coastal location that can explain this uneven population distribution pattern?

Figure 1 | Australia’s population distribution and density

Coastal locations and rainfall are not the only reasons Australians live where they do. The availability of mineral resources, irrigation schemes to enhance farm production, and remote and stunning tourist destinations are geographical factors that draw people to live in a particular place.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of rainfall within Australia. Comparing figures 1 and 2, it is apparent that there is a strong interconnection between the availability of more than 800 mm of rainfall per year and population densities of more than 10 and more than 100 people per square kilometre in the east, south-east and south-west of Australia. It would be easy to say that Australians live in places where rainfall is higher, but if you look at these maps carefully there are major exceptions to this spatial pattern. What is the relationship between population density and total rainfall in the north of Australia? Is the population density high in the regions of high rainfall in Queensland and the Northern Territory?

Figure 2 | The distribution of annual rainfall in Australia

Figure 3 | A remote town in northern Australia, which has a very low population density
How do population densities in Australia compare with those in other places?

Figure 1 shows both the population distribution and density for Australia in the present day. To better understand this data, we need to compare Australia’s population density with that of other places in the world. This map shows that small areas around the major state capital cities have population densities of over 100 people per square kilometre of land. Look at table 1 and you can see that the average population density for Australia is well below the global average, and is easily the lowest of any of the permanently inhabited continents.

The population density of Australia is similar to that of Canada (3 people per square kilometre), but much lower than that of New Zealand (15 people per square kilometre), the United States (29 people per square kilometre) or China (134 people per square kilometre). Consider the geographical factors that Australia might share with Canada but not New Zealand, the United States or China that could explain the significant difference between their population densities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continent</th>
<th>Average population density (people per square km)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
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Table 1 | The average population density for each continent

COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES IN YOUR BOOK

REMEMBER...
1. Which regions of Australia have the highest population density?
2. What is the difference between population density and population distribution?

EXPLAIN...
3. What geographical features other than rainfall may lead to uneven distribution of population in Australia?
4. Use the statistics in table 1 to create a pictograph.

DISCOVER...
5. Use an atlas or other research to identify and list:
   a) geographical landforms and climatic features that are common to Australia and Canada.
   b) reasons New Zealand, the US or China may have a higher population density than Australia

THINK...
6. Use information from figure 2 to explain why, in the future there may be significant movement of people from the southern states of Australia to places in the tropical north.