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As the Mississippi River flows south, the land becomes flatter and warmer until eventually the river spills out into the Gulf of Mexico. The Mississippi is the largest of many rivers and streams that flow through the marshy lands of the Gulf Coast ecoregion to meet the ocean. This coastal ecoregion stretches in an arc from the tip of Florida to the tip of Texas, passing through the southern areas of Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi on the way. In these coastal flatlands, temperate and tropical climates as well as salt and fresh waters combine to create an ecoregion of astonishing beauty and productivity.

To the east, the Gulf Coast ecoregion begins with the swampy western coast of Florida, including the Everglades in the southern tip of the state. In the Everglades, shallow sheets of water flow slowly towards the ocean, creating freshwater sloughs, or low-lying areas of land that channel water. Mangroves grow up and down Florida's coast and can survive in the salty coastal waters, providing feeding and nesting places for shrimp and fish with their long roots. Further west, the Mississippi River empties into the ocean, creating an estuary where salt water from the Gulf of Mexico mixes with fresh Mississippi water. The vast acres of wetlands here are home to many commercially important species, such as oysters and blue crabs. On the western side of the Gulf Coast ecoregion, the longest barrier island in the world, Padre Island, lies along the coast of Southern Texas and forms the Laguna Madre lagoon. Padre Island's uninhabited beaches are one of the most important nesting places for sea turtles, including the endangered

Kemp's Ridley sea turtle.

Although the Gulf Coast ecoregion is one of North America's most diverse and productive, frequent hurricanes on the coast, fires in the dry upland areas and the pounding ocean surf ensure that these ecosystems are constantly responding to the demanding climate.

Downloads

- [Case Study: The Gulf Coast](#)
- [Activity - Transect of a Habitat](#)
- [Activity - Incredible Shrinking Habitat](#)