

There are three things, other than funny hats and pointy-toed boots, that distinguish the West from the rest of the country:

(1) Mountains. The shifting crustal plates have rippled it with range upon range of rugged mountains. From the Rocky Mountain front to the Pacific Coast, mountains are almost always in sight. There is lots of flat land between the mountains, of course—the land you see from the highways. But most of it is high plateau, averaging 1500 meters above sea level. High altitude means cold winters and short growing seasons.

(2) Aridity. Thanks in part to the rainshadow effect of the mountains, most of the West is also dry. It is either steppe (a semiarid climate that can support short grass) or full-fledged desert. With minor exceptions, it is too dry to farm without irrigation. A good many homesteaders discovered that the hard way. You can still see their decaying cabins dotting the landscape. Only a narrow coastal strip of the Pacific Northwest is both wet and warm enough to support Eastern style farming. It is no coincidence that Oregon was the original destination of settlers trekking west in the 1840s.

In short, nine-tenths of the West is too dry, too cold, too steep, or too rocky for crop farming. And it is farming that sustains large rural populations.

(3) Public Land. Mainly because it is useless for farming, half the West was never claimed under the various 19th century land grant laws. Since the nation is now full, the land giveaway laws have been repealed (except for the controversial 1872 Mining Law). The land that no one wanted remains in public ownership, freely accessible to all, the last vestige of a public domain that once stretched from the Appalachians to the Pacific. The public lands include:

BLM land (Bureau of Land Management)	23% of the West
National Forests	18%
National Parks and Monuments	1.5%
National Wildlife Refuges	0.7%
National Recreation Areas (mainly reservoirs)	0.4%

Another 2% of the West is government land, used for bombing, war games, and weapons development. The military says it needs much more and is currently trying to appropriate another half percent (14000 km²) from the public lands. Several additional percent is owned by the states and might be considered public. Since the public lands have no permanent inhabitants, they appear empty on a population map. But they are by no means unused. Their resources are open to private commercial exploitation and they serve tens of millions of recreational visitors a year.

The Great Plains are sometimes included in the West, dividing the country in two at the 100th meridian. While the Plains lack the mountains and public land of the "real West", they satisfy the high-and-dry test. Figures in this essay are for the 11 western states, the West of the statisticians, which roughly splits the differences between these two geographic definitions.

Forests