
The Geography of the Western Caroline Islands

B. J. TILLMAN, Murray State College, Murray, Kentucky

ABSTRACT

The Caroline Islands are located at approximately 7 degrees North Latitude and 136 degrees East Longitude. The Western Carolines, as defined here, are those islands of the group west of Truk.

The Carolines are built on a long subterranean mountain chain. This mountain chain is part of one of the two principal volcanic belts of the world. Sometime in the past eruptions occurred and cones shoved up to, or near, the surface creating the ideal habitat for the polyp. This animal converted the cones into coral islands.

These islands are near the equator, yet there is no excessive heat. Temperatures remain near the eighties throughout the year. The rainfall is copious even though it is seasonal. The rainfall averages 156 inches a year.

The soils vary in fertility, but as a rule they are fertile in the interior and unproductive toward the outer edges. The barrenness of the periphery is largely due to the deposition of salt by ocean spray.

The flora and fauna are principally composed of species found in many low latitude islands of low profile, such as coconut palms, breadfruit, oranges, limes and bananas. A great many of the plants and animals have been introduced from other latitudes by man.

The history of the Western Carolines is limited. Archaeological remains indicate that these islands were inhabited by the same type of migrant from Indonesia that settled other parts of Micronesia.

The present population of the Carolines is a mixture of Polynesian, Melanesian, Mongoloid, and the original Malayan ancestors.

A census taken in 1935 listed 30,000 people in the Carolines with the densest concentrations in Palau and Yap. Because of disease and a low birth rate the population is decreasing rapidly.

The native in practically all of these islands is still in the hunting and collecting economy. Where exceptions to this occur it is because of foreign intervention. The native is usually content to secure only enough food to satisfy his immediate needs.

Possibly, from the rest of the world's viewpoint, the most important phase of the Carolinians' economy is their location. They are in a key position to link the Americas with Asia. Yap has been an important cable station since before World War I and today we think of these islands as an outer perimeter of defense.

The future of these islands is unavoidably linked with that of the large countries that border the Pacific. At the present time it seems as though this primitive paradise is destined to become a half-way station for aircraft and outposts for the protection of more powerful neighbors.