



Pacific South America

ECONOMY

Living in the Land of Fire

Sergio Santelices is a rancher in the rugged Magallanes, a region in southern Chile. The region is named after the Strait of Magellan. This narrow body of water at the tip of South America passes between the island of Tierra del Fuego and the mainland, linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Across the strait from Tierra del Fuego is the port town of Punta Arenas. Santelices' ranch is nearby. Here he describes the ranch, the region's development, and his life in this isolated part of his country.

Punta Arenas was founded in 1848, by a Chilean army officer. The first Europeans arrived twenty years later. They decided to try stock farming, and the first three hundred sheep were brought from the Falkland Islands. The area had previously been inhabited only by nomadic Indians, who lived by fishing and hunting guanacos, animals related to the llama.

By the beginning of this century [1900s], the wool industry was well developed. Huge *estancias* (ranches) were established and leased by the State [Chile's government] to private farmers. These have since been divided into smaller *estancias*, which are much easier to maintain.

I came to own my *estancia* after the last big distribution of land, in 1978. *Estancias* of 5,000 hectares (12,355 acres), with 5,000 sheep, were offered for sale. Applicants were required to be from the region and to have cattle-ranching experience. I was able to meet these requirements, and so bought my farm.

In Magallanes, it is commonly accepted that 5,000 is a sufficient number of animals to provide a farmer with a living. The sale of the meat pays for the running of the farm, and the wool pays for living expenses.

The climate in this part of the world is very harsh. Winters are cold and summers are very windy. I prefer the winter, when the cold is easier to cope with—the constant sound of wind in summer drives me crazy! But although the climate is harsh for humans, it isn't for sheep. Good quality grass which is resistant to cold and wind allows our animals to produce very high quality wool. Our main buyers come from England, France, and Italy.

Traditionally, we have always bred sheep in Magallanes, but during the sixties, people started breeding cattle. I have 630 head of cattle, which I sell at Santiago [Chile's capital city]. The 3,000 kilometer (1,800 mile) journey by truck through Argentina takes between seven and ten days. But a transport ship now operates from Punta Arenas to Puerto Montt, taking only two days. From there to Santiago, the journey is only 1,000 kilometers (621 miles) on good roads.

The sheep-shearing season is from December to February, when farmers contract [hire] shearers to do the work. They are skilled and do their job very fast. A good shearer takes two minutes to shear a sheep. Groups

of twenty-six men will shear 1,200 to 1,300 animals in a day. At my *estancia*, the work takes five or six days. The rest of the year I work the *estancia* with only two workers. The wool is usually sold unwashed in bales to independent buyers who travel around the region buying wool.

Soon we will have to move to the city so that our children can go to secondary school [high school]. Although I love living in the country, I suppose that I will soon get used to traveling to my *estancia* from Punta Arenas, two or three times a week.

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. What is the main economic activity in extreme southern Chile?

2. What natural resource is present in the Magallanes that allows sheep to be raised profitably there? Explain why this is so.

3. Identify four pieces of information that suggest Magallanes is a remote area and that life there is an isolated existence?

Activity

Imagine that you are one of Santelices’ children. Write an entry for your diary describing the typical day on your *estancia*.