

The **Ozarks**, also referred to as the **Ozark Mountains**, **Ozarks Mountain Country**, and the **Ozark Plateau**, are a physiographic and geologic highland region of the central United States. It covers much of the southern half of Missouri and an extensive portion of northwestern and north central Arkansas. The region also extends westward into northeastern Oklahoma and extreme southeastern Kansas. The Shawnee Hills of southwest Illinois, which lie near the eastern edge of this region, are commonly called the "Illinois Ozarks" but are generally not considered part of the true Ozarks.

Although referred to as the Ozark Mountains, the region is actually a high and deeply dissected plateau. Geologically, the area is a broad dome around the Saint Francois Mountains. The Ozark Highlands area, covering nearly 47,000 square miles (122,000 km²), is by far the most extensive mountainous region between the Appalachians and the Rocky Mountains. Together, the Ozarks and Ouachita Mountains form an area known as the U.S. Interior Highlands, and are sometimes referred to collectively. For example, the ecoregion called Ozark Mountain Forests includes the Ouachita Mountains, although the Arkansas River Valley and the Ouachitas, both south of the Boston Mountains, are not usually considered part of the Ozarks.

The majority of the Ozarks is forested; oak-hickory is the predominant type; Eastern Junipers are common, with stands of pine often seen in the southern range. Less than a quarter of the region has been cleared for pasture and cropland.^[48] Forests that were heavily logged during the early-to-mid-20th century have recovered; much of the remaining timber in the Ozarks is second-growth forest. However, deforestation of frontier forest contributed through erosion to increased gravel bars along Ozark waterways in logged areas; stream channels have become wider and shallower and deepwater fish habitat has been lost.^[15]

The numerous rivers and streams of the region saw hundreds of water powered timber and grist mills.^{[49][50]} Mills were important centers of culture and commerce; dispersed widely throughout the region, mills served local needs, often thriving within a few miles of another facility. Few Ozark mills relied on inefficient water wheels for power; most utilized a dam, millrace and water turbine.^[51]

Early settlers relied on hunting, fishing, and trapping, as well as foraging to supplement their diets and incomes.^[35] Today hunting and fishing for recreation are common activities and an important part of the tourist industry. Foraging for mushrooms (especially morels) and for ginseng is common and financially supported by established buyers in the area. Other forages include poke, watercress, persimmons and pawpaw; wild berries such as blackberry, black raspberry, raspberry, red mulberry, black cherry, wild strawberry and dewberry; and wild nuts such as black walnut and even acorns.^[60] Edible native legumes, wild grasses and wildflowers are plentiful, and beekeeping is common.^[61]