**Human Ecology**

The extension of concepts drawn from Ecology\* to the social realm: ecology deals with the relationships between organisms and their environment, and so human ecology studies the relationships between people and their social and physical environments.

Steiner and Nauser defined the term as ‘looking at human life spaces and the interplay occurring in those spaces between human beings and the biophysical environment’.

Dangana and Tropp wrote: Human ecology is concerned with relationship to the global environment. This vast field includes the patterns of development of past and present human societies as they have sought, by regulation and adaptation, to come to grips with a changing world throughout geological and historical time.

The term has a long history and its use highlights some of the important changes in geography during the 20th century. Steiner and Nauser note that although geography originally set out from the background of a philosophy which stressed the importance of a holistic view of regions and landscapes, it has become internally segmented and divergent. This has meant importing ideas from other disciplines to create sub-disciplines such as URBAN GEOGRAPHY and SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY. Steiner and Nauser add that geography tends to import theories and methods from the neighbouring disciplines, whereas the latter are largely unconcerned with developments in geography. This situation has changed to some degree, but the comment remains valid.

The term came to geography via sociology, when a University of Chicago geographer, Harlan Barrows (1923), defined geography as ‘the science of human ecology’. This definition gave the term a different sense than that used by the Chicago School of Sociologists, who included Park, Burgess, Thomas and Wirth; they imported concepts and analogies from ecology (such as community, competition, disturbance, climax equilibrium and invasion and succession: cf.\* SOCIAL DARWINISM\*) to develop theories and models on human society but were not explicitly concerned with interrelationships with nature. Sociological human ecology has since tended to downplay the urban spatial focus of the Chicago School.

Barrows’ focus was on human adjustment to physical environments and promoted a NOMOTHETIC\* aspect to geography’s character that the Chicago School Sociologists, Robert Park would have denied the discipline. The term ‘human ecology’ was not firmly established in geography thereafter, however, although it appears later in geographies of Environmental Hazards. Its use increased during the early 1970s following the United Nations Conference on Human Environment (known as Stockholm’72) and has been extended into fields such as design and economic, which as currently practised, has been termed ‘errant human ecology’. The term has also been used by biologists to refer to the dwindling naturalness of environments. The contemporary inter-disciplinary journal *Human Ecology* claims to provide a forum for papers concerned with the complex and varied systems of interaction between people and their environment; the named subject areas from which papers are encouraged are anthropology, geography, psychology, biology, sociology and urban planning.

The recent use of the term in geography has been limited. This may be a result of various interacting actors, including the term’s vagueness through use in many disciplines and its connotations with ideas that were popular earlier in the twentieth century. Concern about SYSTEM ANALYSIS\*, and its use in limits to growth work in the early 1970s, coincided with Chorley’s (1973) attack on human ecology as a futile attempt to regain something natural. Almost simultaneously, David Harvey’s Social Justice and the City (1973) heralded a move away from both system analysis and human ecology to MARXIST GEOGRAPHY\*.

Terminologies

Ecology

* the branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings.

cf.

* use in writing when you [want](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/want) the [reader](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/reader) to make a [comparison](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/comparison) between the [subject](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/subject) being [discussed](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/discuss) and something [else](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/else) (from the Latin word confer).

SOCIAL DARWINISM

* The theory that individuals, groups, and peoples are subject to the same Darwinian laws of natural selection as plants and animals. Now largely discredited, social Darwinism was advocated by Herbert Spencer and others in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and was used to justify political conservatism, imperialism, and racism and to discourage intervention and reform.

NOMOTHETIC

* Literally means "proposition of the law" (Greek derivation) and is used in [philosophy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy), [psychology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychology), and [law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law) with differing meanings.
* It is concerned with the universal and the general.

SYSTEM ANALYSIS

* A mathematical approach to the modelling of SYSTEMS\*, using techniques developed in control engineering to investigate systems behaviour in response to external stimuli

SYSTEMS

* A group of elements organized such that each one is in some way interdependent (either directly or indirectly) with every other element.

MARXIST GEOGRAPHY

* The study of geographical questions using the analytical insights, concepts, and theoretical framework of Marxism.