These terms reflect a recurrent theme, and recurrent confusion, in geography, at least in English-speaking countries. In shortest form the thought has been expressed in terms of "main-land relationships" or, more formally, as "the influences of natural environment on man." Indeed at the turn of the century and for nearly a generation following, this expression was commonly stated as the purpose of study in geography.

So familiar were these terms that they were seldom if ever defined. The author of The Nature of Geography writing in 1939 assumed that "anyone can understand the meaning of 'natural environment' and, so far as I know, there is very general agreement among geographers as to exactly what it includes." And yet when two careful scholars from another field examined this concept a decade later, they found no clear agreement among geographers. Hence in re-examining the subject, in my "Perspective on the Nature of Geography," in 1959, I looked more sharply at these terms, but the sudden development since then of concern over what man has done to 'nature',—the world wide-concern for our "environment"—has caused geographers to restore this term to a central place in our thinking. If we are to contribute light, rather than merely propaganda, we need to clarify just what we mean in using these terms.

First, concerning the term 'nature' and its adjective 'natural', in the broadest sense these terms, in Western European languages, were formerly used to denote the objective world outside of the observer's mind—this was common in the writings of Humboldt, Ritter, and many others a century or more ago. In more common usage 'natural' was, and is, often taken to mean something inherent and not arbitra-
rily imposed, as in the expression “man in his natural state” —

Later in the nineteenth century, in geography as in science in general the terms ‘nature’ or ‘natural’ came to be used more narrowly as in direct and complete contrast with ‘human’, excepting that in his physical characteristics, those he held in common with other animals, as in his anatomy and physiology, man was still recognized as ‘natural’. But what he produced—his artifacts, his ideas, his institutions—these were ‘human’ or ‘social’ products, literally ‘artificial’ in contrast to the works of nature. ‘Nature’ in short had become something less than the objective reality around us—namely that objective reality with man and his works deleted. At the same time however, many still considered it ‘natural’, certainly in ‘the nature of man’, to wear furs or other clothing against the cold, to live in social groups, and even to organize political territories—“man, the political animal.” So confusion continued.

The dychotomy which writers were attempting to express could not be stated clearly by the opposition of the terms ‘man’ and ‘nature’, but only by distinguishing between all that is human or of human origin versus all that is not—i.e., man versus reality minus man. The fact that we have no positive expression for this truncated reality raises the question whether in fact it can be considered as more than an abstraction, whether the collection of all things other than those that are in any part of human origin constitutes a real entity. But as long as we call it ‘nature’ we are led to believe in it as something having real existence, and even—in the minds of many at least—as being something ‘good’, reality unchanged by man in contrast to the artificial works of man. Isn’t man the polluter, the destroyer, the corrupter of the beauties of nature?

In fact however the contrast in popular thought it rarely between the human and the purely non-human—‘nature in the narrower sense’, which few of us have ever seen—but simply between the urban and the rural scene, forgetting that the rural scene, even one widely acclaimed as “beautiful nature”, may be in no small degree the work
In academic studies in the nineteenth century there appeared a need to separate the human factor from the total reality in order to utilize the scientific techniques of generalization and law-making, since these seemed not applicable where individual human actions and decision seemed to be the determining factors—hence the cleavage developed in universities between the so-called ‘natural sciences’ and the human or social studies. But if humans were considered in the mass, rather than individually, it appeared possible to establish at least statistical laws explaining human behavior. If the new social sciences were to have the firm foundation of the natural sciences, there must be lawful order in the relationships of man to nature—that is, in the correlation between the variations of human, or social, phenomena over the earth, with those of the non-human, as studied in the natural sciences. This came to be the function geography assumed in the late nineteenth century, that of determining the laws explaining the relationships between man and his ‘natural environment’.

Under this ‘environmental concept of geography,’ no one supposed a simple direct relationship of nature as cause, man as effect—no geographer was a strict ‘determinist’. The relationship was always recognized as qualified by the consequences in social heritage of past relationships. Semple, following Ratzel, spoke of “geographical influences”, Barrows’ and others, of “man’s adjustment to his natural environment”, and Griffith Taylor, while recognizing that man is the determining factor, nonetheless thought in terms of what might be called a natural, rather than divine theology—i.e., of “nature’s plan” which man should seek to follow.

In this view of geography, however expressed, the concept of ‘nature’ involved is not merely something in itself—the sum of land, air, water, plants and animals—for this is a collection having no unity in itself and no internal measure of significance of different items within it. Rather what is clearly involved is this collection function-
ing as the surroundings of something else.

What then is meant by the 'natural environment of man'? First, as Sauer noted nearly fifty years ago, in spite of the use of the word 'natural' the term is one of cultural appraisal: the meaning and significance of the word 'environment' depends on what it is considered as surrounding, as environing. Nature as environment is different for man than for ants, it was very different for the inhabitants of America before Columbus than for those of today.

Secondly, we are not speaking of the total environment of man, but of a much more limited concept: man surrounded by the things that are not of man. But since in reality, the real environment as we know it around us, the things of human origin and those of non-human origin are so intermixed as to make this concept of the 'natural environment' a highly theoretical construct which in the real universe today is scarcely to be found in any of the lands of the world. We are not to make the common error of supposing a wilderness to be 'natural', or to think of a dense tropical rainforest of the tropics as 'natural' in the sense of independent of the work of man. On the contrary, in any of these cases, as well as in many cases of highly developed cultural landscapes, it may be a very difficult, or even impossible task to separate out the elements originally of human origin from those of non-human—i.e., 'natural' origin.

The concept of the 'natural environment', in conclusion, came into prominence in geography only when it appeared to be the goal of geography to measure the effect of the non-human universe on man, or man's adjustments to all that is of non-human origin around him. But this goal, whatever its place in philosophy, is not essential to science and therefore not required of geography. Since the concept itself is theoretical and cannot be measured, it hinders rather than helps our research. So once more I echo the French geographer Le Lannou in repudiating "the myth of the natural environment, deprived absolutely of sense in our discipline."

Rather, geography is concerned with the total environment of man
in any area, with all the features and elements that are interrelated within it. We are concerned to depict, analyze, and explain, these with no special concern for the degree to which any may be of human or non-human origin.

This statement returns geography to the oldest and longest developed concept of its object, or objects of study: the study of places or areas, or regions, or earth-spaces, whichever words you prefer—at all levels of size from small localities to the sum of all places, the total area of the earth shell. The statement obviously echoes Ritter’s famous phrase: earth-areas as filled with the multiplicity of earthly things, in interrelation in place and interconnection among places.

In studying any one item in an area, such as a farm, or the animal life, or the landforms, we study that item as related to all the rest around it, its environment. In this sense we can speak of an infinite multiplicity of environments, each the surroundings of a particular phenomenon. Of all the items of area, mankind is ultimately most concerned with man, hence with all that forms the total environment of man. And our measure of the relative significance among the infinite number of phenomena in area is the significance of each to that total environment of man.

This brings us finally to our third term—man, or mankind. Do we mean any individual man or woman; a single living group, family or tribe; all mankind at any one time; or all mankind throughout all history? The environment of any one individual would include all the people around him; such biographical studies are not the focus of interest in geography. In an area populated by many tribes, the study of any one tribe, as in sociology, will include the other tribes as part of the environment. If, on the other hand, we say that in geography we are concerned to study an area as the environment of all its people we must specify at what time in history, since that environment itself has been constantly changed through history, in part by changes of non-human origin as in climate or shorelines—far more by the works of man which have become a part of successive
environments.

In sum, a central theme in any area study is the relation, in both directions, of its people at any one time to all the rest that is in the area, including what is brought into it through interconnections to and from other areas, and including things of both human and non-human origin.

The multitudinous variety of that environment must be broken down for study into many categories. These however do not fit into an intellectual dychotomy of human and non-human, nor into a classification of chemical substances, let alone the atomic elements. Rather we start with actual features each composed of complex combinations of many such elements, but each functioning in relation to man more or less as wholes. These include material features, such as those of the atmosphere, including of course whatever man puts into it, features of the surface waters and the ice areas, of the forms of the land, of fields, farms, buildings, roads, and moving vehicles. They also include such immaterial features as languages, cultures, religions and governments.

In final summary: I see no need in geography for the confusing terms nature of natural, as contrasted with human. Our concern is with man and his environment varying in the different areas of the earth and in interconnection among those areas. In the interrelations of man and his environment we are concerned with whatever in that total environment affects him, and with what he does to change that environment, whether ignorantly or through conscious planning, and to comprehend the two together as forming the character and interconnections of the areas of the world, which are the objects of study in geography.