



## **Urban mega-regions: opportunity or regret?**

By David Suzuki with Faisal Moola

According to author and New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, the world is flat. By this, he means the planet has effectively become seamless as a result of globalization and the interconnections brought about by email, cheap transcontinental flights, and the easy flow of goods and services across borders.

Economic geographer Richard Florida believes otherwise. In his best-selling book, *Who's Your City?*, Dr. Florida argues that the world is a “spiky place”, characterized by a concentration of economic activity, innovation, and resulting prosperity in a relatively small number of urban hotspots around the planet. These include world-class cities like Prague and Berlin and massive urban regions such as Greater Tokyo and the powerhouse corridor that runs from Boston through New York to Washington D.C. (which he calls “BosWash”). Together, these latter two mega-regions generated a massive economic output of \$2.2 trillion last year.

“In terms of both sheer economic horsepower and cutting-edge innovation, today’s global economy is powered by a surprisingly small number of places,” Dr. Florida writes. “The tallest spikes – the cities and regions that drive the world economy – are growing ever higher, while the valleys – places that boast little, if any, economic activity – mostly languish.”

This is especially true in Canada. Despite being a vast nation of mountains, forests, and ice, where wilderness and wildlife feature prominently in what Dr. Florida calls our “nature-loving, outdoorsy culture”, Canada is an urban society. Close to 80 per cent of Canadians live in cities, and more than half of our country’s economic wealth is generated in five metropolitan areas (Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa, Calgary, and Montreal), while rural and resource-based communities in the nation’s heartland remain economically vulnerable.

Dr. Florida believes the concentration of people, and especially newcomers, in these urban areas has generated many desirable benefits, such as scientific advancements; explosions of creativity in art, writing, and music; and thousands of jobs in the emerging green-tech sector.

Yet, although cities in Canada have clearly emerged as centres of human capital, their growth has had a correspondingly devastating impact on natural capital – ecosystems such as forests, wetlands, and rivers that sustain the health and well-being of the very people who live there.

Forests in urban settings, between cities, and in the countryside illustrate the importance of natural capital. They ensure that steep slopes remain stable, that flood risks are lower, and that drinking water comes out of the tap filtered and clean. But rapid population increases and extensive development associated with these urban hubs is placing unprecedented pressure on natural areas, leading to a loss of fertile agricultural soils, forests, wetlands, estuaries, and other ecosystems.

Take the Golden Horseshoe, an expansive area encompassing the Niagara Peninsula, Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo, and the region's anchor, the Greater Toronto Area. Nearly a quarter of Canada's population lives here, in the fastest growing region in North America. Dr. Florida heaps praise upon this densely populated corridor, citing its successful high-tech companies, access to venture capital, world-class universities, ethnic diversity, and lively arts and culture.

It is a vibrant place. But this mega-region has come together largely in an unplanned mess of urban sprawl. A once diverse mosaic of woodlands, wetlands, towns and villages, and productive farmland has been replaced with a seemingly endless expanse of built-up areas, crisscrossed with hydro-lines and highways, and pockmarked with trophy homes.

A David Suzuki Foundation report released last year concluded that an alarming 16 per cent of farmland in the Greater Toronto Area has been lost to urban encroachment over the last decade alone. This represents the loss of thousands of hectares of some of the most fertile soils in all of Canada, something we should all be concerned about if we want to maintain local food security and minimize the environmental costs, such as long-distance transportation, of the food we eat.

Both of us spent part of our childhoods in Ontario's Golden Horseshoe. And although we're nearly a generation apart in age, we have fond memories of the place before it became one of the world's urban mega-regions. We believe that while urban growth and development can foster wealth-generation, innovation, science, and the cultural achievements that Dr. Florida and other urbanophiles like him praise, only "smart growth" (see [www.smartgrowth.org](http://www.smartgrowth.org)) can enhance our quality of life while preserving the natural environment and our precious agricultural soils.

Take David Suzuki's Nature Challenge and learn more at [www.davidsuzuki.org](http://www.davidsuzuki.org).