THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The Pacific Northwest, strong and free: On the inevitable rise of Cascadia

B.C., Washington state and Oregon share more than just beautiful landscapes and progressive politics: They face environmental and economic challenges that will tie them closer together

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Big Lonely Doug, a Douglas fir saved from clear-cutting in the 2010s, stands near Port Renfrew, B.C. With the blue sky and green Vancouver Island landscape, the scene almost resembles the tricolour Cascadia flag (or 'Doug' flag) designed by Alexander Baretich for the region spanning much of B.C. and the U.S. Pacific Northwest.Melissa Renwick/The Globe and Mail

There was a moment after Canada's last federal election, long before anyone ever heard of COVID-19, when frustration in Alberta over the lack of a political voice crystallized into a movement for outright independence.

“Wexit” became the name for a fringe movement, by all signs stillborn, agitating for a sovereign Alberta. For all its bluster, the idea of Alberta separation remains a mostly impotent sentiment, rising and falling with the price volatility of a barrel of oil sands synthetic crude.

If there is any real prospect for independence in the West today, it won’t come from aggrieved Albertans, but from progressive forces gathering on the Northwest Coast of North America.

It’s here, in the coming decades, that southwestern British Columbia, centred around Greater Vancouver, will become drawn into a closer union with Metro Seattle in Washington State and Portland in Oregon – part of a wider transboundary region known as Cascadia.

Speak the word “Cascadia” on the West Coast of North America and it will mean many things to many people. It’s a globally significant hotbed of biodiversity unified by salmon, ocean and rainforest; a fantasy nation state that already has its own flag and novelty passports; a youth movement based around craft beer and intense sports rivalries; and to some tech businesses and academics, it’s a potential “megaregion” waiting to be linked by high-speed rail and tech-enabled smart cities.

For me, the heart of the Cascadia idea is the notion that, as a Vancouverite, I have more in common with someone in Seattle or Portland than with a Calgarian or Torontonian. I’m living proof: I grew up in suburban Toronto but have been living in Vancouver for more than 20 years, during which time I have come to think of myself as something more than British Columbian or Canadian.

Much of that something is about physical place. Cascadia takes its name from the Cascade Mountains, a chain of mostly extinct volcanoes stretching 1,300 kilometres from around Chilliwack, B.C., to Northern California, forming the backbone of a region defined by salmon rivers, rugged Pacific coastline and remnant stands of temperate rainforest.

In spite of runaway housing unaffordability, chronic traffic gridlock and much more, many who identify as Cascadian genuinely believe that life is better here. This will only grow in the decades to come, as the effects of climate change render swaths of the Lower 48 states unlivable, and the world increasingly seeks to make the Pacific Northwest home.

Some of Cascadia's urban and natural attractions, clockwise from top left: Vancouver, spirit bears, Seattle (and the Cascade mountains beyond it) and whales off the coast of the Great Bear Rainforest. Cascadia is more of a bioregion than a polity with clearly defined borders, but the map below offers a general idea of where it is.Photos: The Canadian Press, Reuters, The Globe and Mail

Last year, I took the Amtrak Cascades train to Portland from Vancouver, a corridor that hugs the Cascadia coast through Washington State and Oregon.

My trip on the Amtrak train, my first, mostly converted me to rail travel. Compared with driving, the Amtrak Cascades is a joy – there are stunning ocean views with the freedom to get up and walk around, chat with the other passengers, and eat and drink in a dining car. That said, if you're in a rush, the current is not for you: The train crawled out of East Vancouver's Pacific Central Station so slowly, I could have run faster. We later stopped multiple times for freight trains, which are the priority user of this rail line and have first right of passage.

By choosing the train over a car, I was adding at least two hours to my trip, but I wasn't seeking a quick passage. For me this voyage was an opportunity to slow down and consider the future of Cascadia as something separate from the rest of North America – and to see for myself how train travel itself could be the catalyst to unite the region.

At present, the U.S. Interstate 5 highway ("the I-5") is the primary corridor of movement through much of Cascadia, linking southbound travel from the Canadian border through Puget Sound to Seattle, down into the vast watershed of the Columbia River at Portland and beyond.

But there is a plan, already well into the planning stages, to build a high-speed rail connection between Vancouver and Portland on tracks dedicated to passenger rail. Such a link would make it possible to travel between Vancouver and Seattle in less than 50 minutes, and about an hour from Seattle to Portland, with many new stations in between.

“High-speed rail is the shiny object in the distance that we are all moving toward and would love to see,” says Jonathan Fink, a visiting professor in the office of the vice-president of research and innovation at Vancouver’s University of British Columbia. He is based in Portland but is working in Vancouver to organize collaboration between Cascadian universities. “If you could get from downtown Seattle to Vancouver or Portland in less than an hour, that would basically make the whole region into a single metropolitan area. And that would be transformative.”

Open this photo in gallery:

A conductor prepares an Amtrak train for departure.Alex Wong/Getty Images

Dedicated track would make moving people a priority, versus the current situation where passenger trains must yield for freight – as anyone who has languished on the VIA Rail route between Toronto and Montreal already knows.

Washington State, which has completed a feasibility study and, in 2019, a business case (with funds contributed by Oregon, B.C. and Microsoft), estimates a US$50-billion cost for a high-speed train carrying up to 3.1 million annual passengers at top speeds of 400 kilometres an hour on its own dedicated right of way. It’s a prohibitive amount of money, but Washington State, which would be the primary beneficiary with most of the track and new stations, estimates the cost of adding a new lane on the I-5

between the Canadian border and Portland will cost at least $108-billion. High-speed rail would help solve regional traffic gridlock, and avoid the release of an estimated six million tonnes of CO2 over 40 years, mostly from avoiding car and plane travel. An average of nearly 1,000 tonnes of particulate matter, carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxide could also be avoided each year.

Moving forward, funding for a dedicated passenger rail line could come from many possible sources: carbon and congestion pricing, public-private partnerships with big regional companies like Microsoft, or like Japan's Shinkansen bullet train system, from the proceeds generated by development around the new train stations.

In late July, the U.S. Senate voted in support of a US$1-trillion infrastructure bill championed by President Joe Biden, clearing a major hurdle to spending that would include US$66-billion to upgrade freight and passenger rail, including Amtrak. Such investments won't pay for high-speed rail, but could result in "higher-speed rail" – improvements to the track and system that can cut travel times enough to convince more Cascadians to leave their cars at home.

Even before COVID-19, some business groups were already touting the high-speed rail linkage as the "Cascadia Technology Corridor," where each Cascadian city brings complementary disciplines to the table: Seattle as an anchor with Microsoft, Amazon, Boeing and cloud computing; Vancouver as a tech talent pool, with strong video game, film and future quantum computing industries; and Portland, the smallest of the group, with Pentium and a cluster of apparel companies such as Nike, which are morphing into tech and health care concerns. If it gets built, the rail link could remake the I-5 corridor into something akin to the tech-academic corridor between Toronto and Kitchener-Waterloo in Ontario.

There are other visions of what a resilient regional economy could look like, too – not rooted in technology and big business, but in the knowledge gleaned from millennia of Cascadian co-existence with nature.

Indigenous cultures such as the Gitxsan, Tsleil-Waututh and Haida have made their home in Cascadia for thousands of years, living on the natural abundance of the oceans and forests.Rafal Gerszak and John Lehmann/The Globe and Mail

Environment and economy have always been closely connected in Cascadia: The many First Nations of the Pacific Northwest owed their wealth and rich culture to the bounty of the rainforest and the ocean. Portland, Seattle and Vancouver all began their lives as lumber and salmon fishing centres, as is still apparent as the Amtrak Cascades train skirts the coast along much of its course. Relative to other places,

this coast is teeming with wildlife – the sight of bald eagles is so humdrum here that most locals do not even notice – but it is also littered with the detritus of the abandoned infrastructure of sunset resource industries including logging and fishing. Those plentiful resource jobs of the past century are now gone, and some, like the brain trust behind Salmon Nation, are already thinking about what comes next, viewing it all through a uniquely bioregional lens.

Salmon Nation is a network of environmentalists, First Nations and economically literate progressives who want to build a new resilient economic and social base for the 25 million North Americans who live between the north slope of Alaska and Northern California. It's a region they call "Salmon Nation" – encompassing the expanse of coastal and inland rainforest that historically supported the return of Pacific salmon. (They avoid the term Cascadia, which in some circles has developed a reputation as a fantasy breakaway country.)

"A lot of the dinosaur economy, it's in decline, but it will thrash around and create a lot of damage in its dying years," says B.C. writer and Ecotrust Canada founder Ian Gill, one of the thinkers behind Salmon Nation. "Just think of oil and gas, it will die off naturally, but they will make an awful mess along the way."

In the coming years, Salmon Nation will ease the transition by establishing a trust to channel and build millions of dollars in seed capital, acting like an incubator for a new regional economy that works in harmony with the natural environment and, in particular, doesn't exacerbate climate change.

"Both the curse and the gift of the pandemic has been the revelation that we fundamentally need to change our relationship to nature," Mr. Gill says. "If capital is still going to flow in the world, its highest and greatest return should be at a benefit to nature and the communities that depend on it, not just to narrow, private financial interests."

These are not new ideas. First Nations prospered and lived within Cascadia's ecological limits for millennia. In the Depression-era 1930s, self-sufficiency in local economy and food production was a necessity. And in 1975, Ernest Callenbach wrote an influential book called *Ecotopia*, a fictional account of an independent nation made up of Northern California, Oregon and Washington State – a utopian country where humans and the environment lived in perfect balance. The book is dated and difficult to read now, but at the time, the idea of a tiny breakaway North American nation that was prosperous without degrading the environment was groundbreaking.

Moving forward, Salmon Nation will identify and support the growth of business models across Cascadia that are sustainable and profitable – including small, locally owned businesses in food, forestry and manufacturing sectors.

The effects of climate change will also drive Cascadians closer together like never before.

Even as summer fires and oppressive heat continue to ravage large stretches of the West, Cascadia could be one of the safer havens, relatively speaking. Cities like Seattle in particular could attract climate migrants from more sea-rise vulnerable low-lying coastal areas in Florida, Texas, Louisiana and New York.

UBC's Prof. Fink is organizing seven universities (in addition to colleges, not-for-profits and government) across British Columbia, Washington State and Oregon to work together to find solutions to adapt to Cascadia's future issues with wildfires and smoke. He says regional co-operation on a grand scale will be

required to prepare for the encroachment of fires and smoke on towns, suburbs and cities across the region.

After my train arrives in Portland, I meet for coffee with Dan Douthit, a public-information officer with Portland's Bureau of Emergency Management, to learn more about how the common threats Cascadians face might draw us closer together.

We sit in a downtown café along 4th Avenue facing a block-long "pod" of Mexican and Asian food carts doing a brisk lunchtime business. The first thing I notice about Mr. Douthit is that he has the national flag of Cascadia sewn onto his backpack. It's known as "the Doug" – featuring a thick Douglas fir tree (a dominant local rainforest species), set against tricolour bands of white, blue and green.

"In a lot of ways I think of myself as a Cascadian," he says when I ask about the flag. "I have a close connection to the whole region, not just Washington or Oregon."

Mr. Douthit, it emerges, is Cascadian to the core. He grew up in the Seattle suburbs, went to university in Bellingham, Wash. – a short drive south down the I-5 from Vancouver – and now resides in Portland, where he spends his days preparing locals for any number of man-made and natural calamities.

Across Cascadia, the natural calamity in the back of everyone's mind is the inevitable Cascadia earthquake, simply referred to here as "The Big One." Mr. Douthit says a 9.0 magnitude offshore subduction zone earthquake could shake the entire region from Northern California to Vancouver Island for minutes at a time. Records are limited, but such quakes happen on average every 500 to 600 years; given that the last one happened around 1700, Cascadia is nearly due. The next big one could happen in 200 years or maybe tonight.

This pending disaster is the one caveat to the idea that Cascadia will attract climate refugees: "The real elephant in the room is the Cascadia earthquake," said Prof. Fink when we talked earlier, a subject of particular interest to him because he also teaches geology at Portland State University. "It will be so catastrophic, it's hard to envision what it's going to look like afterward. If it weren't for the risk of earthquakes, the place would explode with people."

If it happens any time soon, Portland will fare the worst. The city has at least 1,600 unreinforced masonry buildings that will be heavily damaged (or collapse) during a big earthquake, and many more wooden buildings that are not adequately connected to their foundations. Seattle also has many dangerous masonry buildings, too, while Vancouver is the best prepared of the three.

Oregon has developed a statewide resilience plan to prepare for a big earthquake, but there has not been much by way of planning for all of Cascadia. "We don't talk together as much as we should," Mr. Douthit says of Washington State and British Columbia. "I think largely, we're on our own."

Prof. Fink wants the three big metro centres of Cascadia to work together and have "at least a broad-brush report on the shelf" that would lay out how major infrastructure can be rebuilt. This would avoid the situation in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, he says, when the areas that were rebuilt followed the patterns of the past without improvement.

"We should take this as an opportunity to design the next Portland, or Seattle, or Vancouver."

My conversation with Mr. Douthit gravitates to the many less apocalyptic things Cascadians have in common. He is a season ticket holder for the Portland Timbers, one of three Major League Soccer teams locked in an intense Cascadia rivalry. There is the annual Cascadia Cup, which is awarded to the best Cascadian team (the Timbers, the Seattle Sounders and Vancouver Whitecaps) during the regular season. Cascadia has also created its own national team through the Cascadia Association Football Federation that plans to compete in international tournaments against other microregions, minorities (Quebec has a team), and nations without a state.

Cascadia sports will get a huge boost when Seattle's new National Hockey League team – the Seattle Kraken – makes it debut in the 2021-22 hockey season. (A kraken is a giant octopus, a Scandinavian mythical sea monster – it resonates here in part because the coastal waters of Puget Sound and the North Pacific are home to the giant Pacific octopus, the world's largest).

Once the border reopens, Canadians are expected to flock to Seattle to see the Canucks play an away game, much the way they currently do when the Seattle Mariners play host to the Toronto Blue Jays – even more so if fans can get there by train in 50 minutes.

At first Mr. Douthit's obsession with Cascadian sports rivalries sounds superficial to me, but as anyone who has spent time in the Lower 48 knows, you cannot underestimate the power of pro sports as a unifying force – in fact, it's one of the last unifying forces left.

Before we part ways, Mr. Douthit provides me with a list of "must-visit" craft breweries, most within easy streetcar transit access from downtown. Vancouver has done much to emulate the Cascadian craft beer revolution centred around Seattle and Portland – the latter has more than 75 microbreweries, more than any other city on Earth. Coming here has become a pilgrimage for international fans of the uniquely Cascadian interpretation of many European beer styles, enabled by the local development of specialty hop varieties such as Cascades hops – grown in Oregon and Washington State and increasingly B.C., with a distinctly citrusy aroma that is an indispensable ingredient in the hoppy pale ales for which Cascadia is world-famous.

My time is short, but I will visit as many recommended breweries as possible before I catch my train home.

While I'm waiting in Portland's Union Station for my train to Vancouver, I ask a conductor to predict when we'll see a high-speed passenger rail line connecting Cascadia.

"Not in my lifetime," he laughs.

Hours later, the sun was setting as the Amtrak Cascades train passed the Skagit River in Washington State, the last river in the entire Lower 48 to support steelhead and all five species of Pacific salmon. The creation of the U.S.-Canada border in 1846 cut it in two, leaving the headwaters in British Columbia, while much of the 240-kilometre river meanders headless through Washington State. The Skagit is not American or Canadian, it is Cascadian.

Not long after my return to Pacific Central Station, the pandemic sealed the border. It remains closed but the passage will not be barred forever. In the months and years to come, as we are forced to rethink a North American economy that depends on just-in-time shipments and supply chains fed from every corner of the globe, the voices calling for deeper connections across Cascadia will only get louder.

This closer union will not be as dramatic as creating a new nation state as some Cascadians (and even Albertans) dream, but more like a return to the natural ebb and flow of people and things that guided life here long before political borders severed Cascadia into separate states and provinces.

Open this photo in gallery:

The Cascadia flag, as designed by Alexander Baretich.