RED SOX NATION'S ROCK-SOLID FOUNDATION:

Over the past two weeks, the Red Sox have proved something that geologists have known for some time: New England is one large state. Boston is its capital.

During this sports-besotted autumn spectacular, I discovered a one-to-one correlation between the geography of Red Sox Nation and the geology of New England.

It's not the case with Yankees fans and New York.

When I say New England is one state, I'm forced to face the reality of six state boundaries drawn on the map. But from my perspective as a Western immigrant, the state governments in New England are more like strong county governments. That's been my perception ever since I moved here 20 years ago from Alaska, where one of the counties (there known as boroughs) has more than twice the land area of the six New England states combined.

Having lived in Alaska, as well as California, Washington and Wisconsin, all of New England looks like one large geographically uniform and culturally rich place sandwiched between the sea and the sweep of spruce-birch forest extending from Vermont's Northeast Kingdom to the trackless woods of interior Maine. And all of this -- windswept mountains included -- curves around the Gulf of Maine like a half-eaten doughnut, with Boston on the inside of the curve.

New England has many geographies. There's political, cultural, historical, ecological and physical geography. But beneath it all lies geology. These two disciplines are often confused because they share the same first syllable, "geo," from the Latin word for earth. The differences lie in the later syllables: "logos," for the logic (science) of the earth, and "graph," for the spatial arrangement of things on its surface.

In the "logic" of earthly matters, New England is one place, thanks to the coherent pattern of rocks beneath the landscape that formed in the root of a single, very old, very beaten-up, ancient mountain system.

New England's western boundary is well defined as the long straight line of the Hudson Valley--Lake Champlain lowland. Its southern boundary is also well defined as the sandy island archipelago extending from Nantucket Island on the east to Staten Island on the west; it was here that the river-washed residues from eroding highlands have been accumulating since before the dinosaurs. New England's northern boundary approximates the drainage divide between Canada's St. Lawrence River and the scallop-shaped Gulf of Maine, which extends as far south as Nantucket.

Only New England's northeastern boundary is arbitrary with respect to the landscape; it was drawn as the boundary between patriots supporting the cause of liberty and loyalists to the English crown who removed themselves to what are now the Canadian Maritimes.

Now, thanks to the Red Sox, nearly everyone knows that the coherent rock block called New England is mirrored by the coherent block of Boston fans who imagine Fenway Park as the center of the sports universe and who either live or used to live in cities and towns that lean toward the Gulf of Maine. As children, they drank water from the Kennebec, Saco, Merrimack, Charles, Blackstone, Thames, Connecticut and Housatonic river watersheds, all of which drain to the northeast Atlantic.

Only along the southwestern edge of this great region -- for example, in Fairfield County, the Litchfield Hills, and the Berkshires -- do we find a significant number of televisions tuned more often
to the Yankees cable channel than to the New England Sports Network. This edge effect diminishes
northward into Vermont, which, even prior to the American Revolution, chose to align itself with the

New York is a different place, as I am not the first to observe.

The city of New York is extraordinary, being strategically located at the junction between the mouth
of the Hudson River the northern edge of the Atlantic coastal plain and the eastern tip of Long
Island.

But the state of New York is one of the most physically arbitrary places on earth. To a geologist, the
Empire State is a chimera: separate geographic fragments attached to a central city as if they were
iron scraps drawn to a powerful city-sized magnet. First to be drawn in was the Hudson Valley,
which is, geologically speaking, part of New England. To the east, Long Island's sandy glacial
moraines have greater affinity with Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard than to the city.

To the northwest is New York's agricultural heartland, much of which could pass for Ohio in a blind
taste test because it, too, lies over soft flat, layered rocks not that different from those in the Grand
Canyon. The south central part of the state looks an awful lot like Pennsylvania's accordion-folded
Appalachian ridge and valley province. To the far west, Buffalo-Niagara is a Great Lakes port, part of
the recovering rustbelt that also includes Cleveland and Detroit. New York is a land of many places,
rather than one.

In contrast, New England is geologically unified landscape with a fringe of sand along its southern
margin.

Since New England looks and feels like a single state, should it become, de jure, a single state? I'm
not a political scientist, but I suspect that would be a hard sell.

We have these atomized governments -- 169 towns in a state as small as Connecticut -- because
European settlers planted deep historic roots before the West opened up. The largely Republican
notion of state's rights found out West is simply a larger version of New England's emphasis on town
rights.

New England political "states" mattered most during initial colonization. Town governments mattered
most during the era of horse- and-buggy travel. But neither scale makes much sense today when
social, environmental and transportation problems are always regional, and when the regions don't
align with arbitrary political boundaries.

So, perhaps sports fans will lead the way to a new regional consciousness.

The fact that the Red Sox are located in Boston is merely a quirk of history. Football fans root for an
all-New England team, the Patriots, whose Foxboro stadium lies near the tri-state boundary of
Rhode Island, Connecticut and Massachusetts.

If the Boston Red Sox went out of business (God forbid), and if a new major league baseball
franchise were to be started today, I suspect that it, too, would be a regional team, perhaps with a
central location. The absence of major league teams beyond Boston -- baseball, football, and
basketball -- proves that the traditional New England states are really strong counties in a single
state of rock and mind.