

Harvard's Ed Glaeser has long been regarded as one of the most astute economists around: economics Nobel laureate George Akerlof thinks he's a "genius." But if he keeps writing posts like [this](#), it will serve as evidence less about him and more about the collapse of economics as a serious profession.

Glaeser and my UCLA colleague Matt Kahn compared the carbon footprints of urban dwellers versus suburbanites:

In almost every metropolitan area, we found the central city residents emitted less carbon than the suburban counterparts. In New York and San Francisco, the average urban family emits more than two tons less carbon annually because it drives less. In Nashville, the city-suburb carbon gap due to driving is more than three tons. After all, density is the defining characteristic of cities. All that closeness means that people need to travel shorter distances, and that shows up clearly in the data.

Great. And it's something that [smart growth advocates](#) and [new urbanists](#) have known for more than a decade now. That's why they are smart growth advocates and new urbanists.

But Glaeser bizarrely goes on to insist that his findings demonstrate the intellectual flaws of **environmentalists**. His evidence for this? Did he check with the Natural Resources Defense Council, or Environmental Defense? Oh no—that would be too dependent upon facts. And gosh, we can't expect that out of an economist, can we?

Instead, Glaeser cites Dr. Seuss' [The Lorax](#), a book published nearly four decades ago. The Lorax doesn't like cities, Glaeser says, and so that means that environmentalists don't, either, and so that means environmentalists are wrong.

Let's put aside the notion that Glaeser badly misreads The Lorax itself: the book condemned environmental degradation, but literally as any six-year-old knows, it was hardly a paean to suburbia. More significantly, he seems to have no idea about what the environmentalist community thinks nowadays.

Consider [SB 375](#), California's landmark smart growth bill, which attempts to tie transportation funding to more compact, sustainable development. Its sponsor was the California League of Conservation Voters, which did extraordinary political work getting it through. Meanwhile, it was opposed by virtually every Republican in the Legislature because it seeks to curtail suburban sprawl. Republican Tom McClintock, a right-wing

knuckle-dragger elected to Congress after parachuting into a blood-red district, [decried the bill](#) on the state Senate floor as “one of the most authoritarian, far-reaching and elitist bills that has ever made it to the governor’s desk” and compared it to Soviet style planning.

During the debate over the stimulus, [it was the environmental community that fought for more transit funding and battled against the powerful highway lobby](#). And where was Glaeser? Reading the Lorax — badly.

To be sure, many — too many — environmentalists still see all development as anathema, either not realizing or not wanting to realize that forbidding urban development just means more sprawl. But if you compare them to libertarians like Glaeser, it’s not even close. I’m still waiting around for libertarians to get serious about carbon taxes, for example.

It’s bad enough that the Grand Obstructionist Party has decided to stake its own future on destroying the planet’s. But it’s just as bad that it has enablers like Glaeser, who can brilliantly analyze statistics but remain completely unable to see beyond [“the fully buttoned pinstripe vest draped with the gold fob from his pocket watch.”](#)

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