

# Tourism Destination Planning: A Realist Position in a Land of Make Believe

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# The problem

- Many destinations/places are increasingly facing demands for 'improved' destination planning – in reality this is often 'code' for finding a solution that satisfies one interest or many
- Destinations are simultaneously seeking to be both 'sustainable' (conserve nature and culture) and 'competitive' (attract more visitors, make more money, attract investment) – but is this actually possible? Especially in the long term?
- To what extent can these goals be integrated (rather than just used simultaneously in policy and planning documents) in thinking about tourism and destination/regional development?

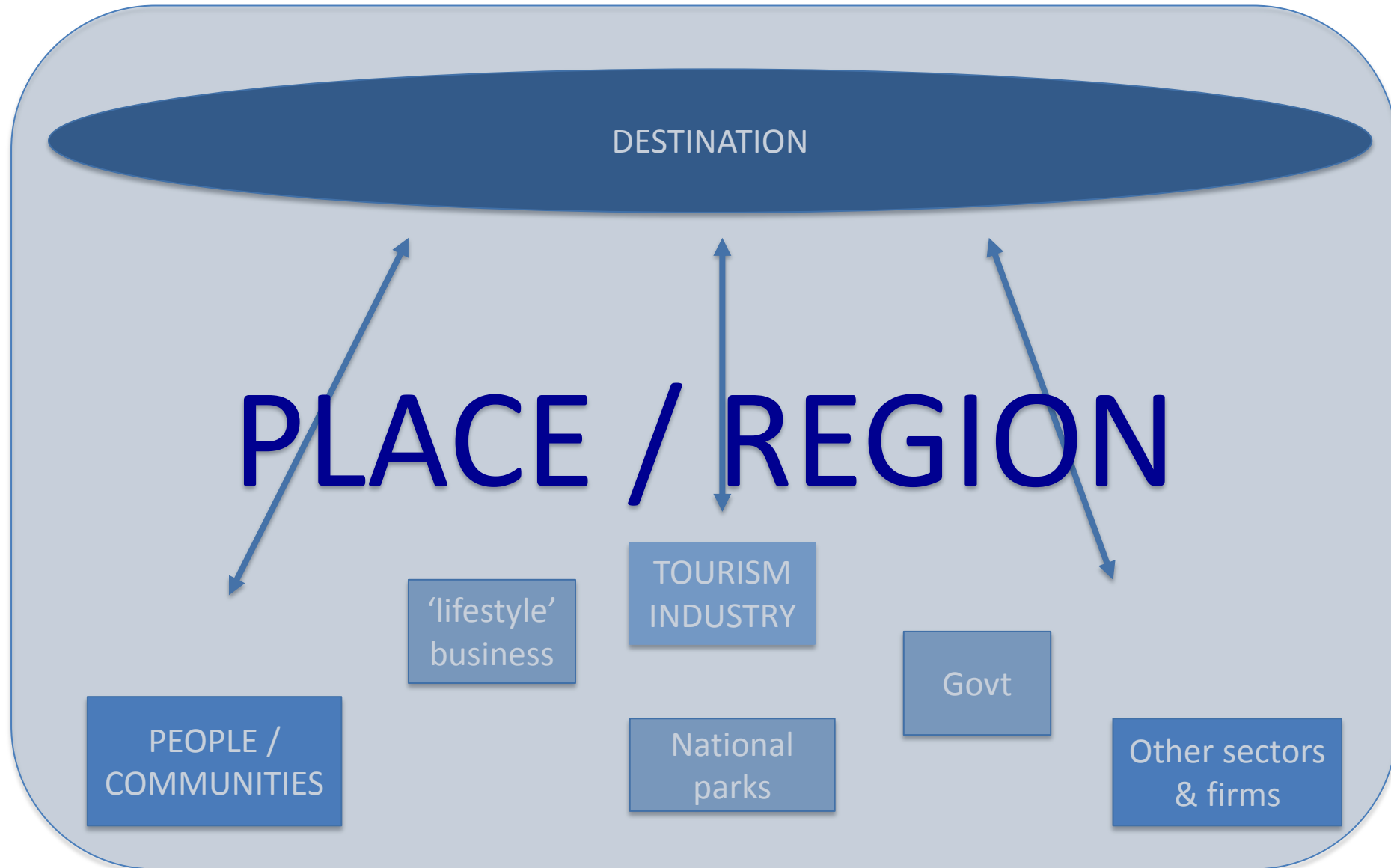
# Destination Planning

- Tourism planning *per se* is really only a concern of tourism research and tourism stakeholders
- Apart from very specific locations tourism planning and policy is not as important as general policy settings, i.e. exchange rates, transport, land use
- Clearly raises questions about the extent that tourism is a part of planning thought and practice (although similar comments could be argued about mobility in general)
  - At senior levels of government tourism is still usually the afterthought and not a “serious” industry
- Concern with the environment and sustainability generally

# Therefore...

- Raises significant questions about the value of much destination planning and policy (as opposed to regional planning and policy), except perhaps at the micro scale of specific attractions and locations
- Value of research as a contribution to planning and policy debates as well as business and government decision-making.
- What real effects do destination strategies have?
  - Visitor numbers?
  - Capital allocation decision-making?
  - Marketing and branding? Destination image?
  - Collaboration between stakeholders?

# What do we mean by destination planning? (depends on where you stand)



# Complexity

- The sheer complexity of destinations means that issues such as sustainability, competitiveness, visitor numbers, perceived impacts, etc are difficult to get agreement on
- The problem of positionality
- A good start is to agree on how to measure such things
- Finding common ground between stakeholders – and having an ongoing process that helps find that ground (and from which stakeholders derive value)
- Takes time, effort and transparency and does not fit easily into many ‘normal’ business and political schedules

# The concept of sustainability in tourism is incredibly successful

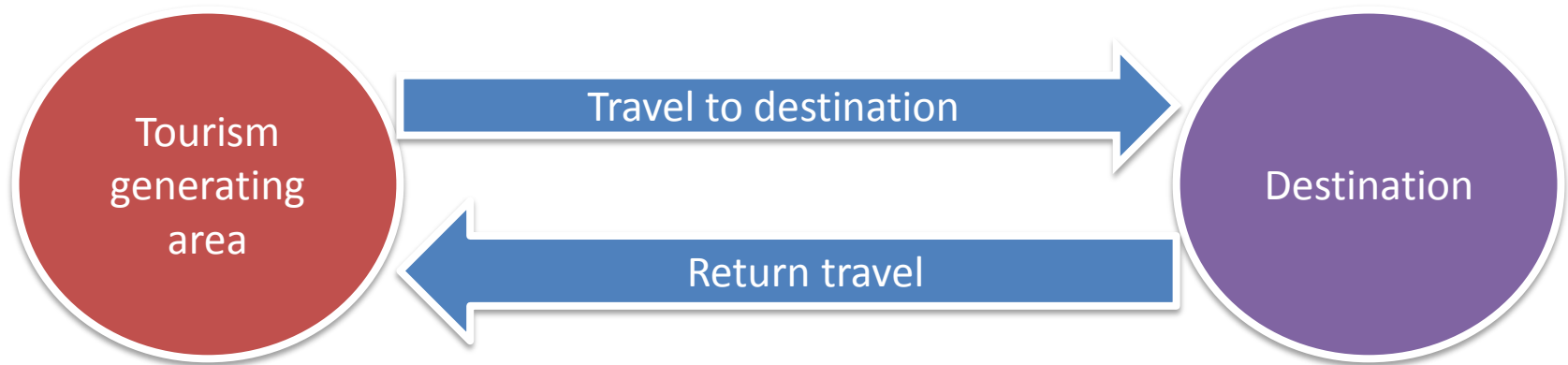
- Innovation and diffusion of the concept over time
  - modern origins in late 1980s
  - From two academic papers in 1989 to  $\approx$  200 a year since 2012
  - A dedicated journal, numerous dedicated texts and courses
  - Widespread adoption of the term in government at all scales, industry organisations, individual firms and non-government organisation policies and statements
  - It has become a part of the lexicon of business and of governments, especially with respect to the policy context within which they operate (although what does it mean?!!!!)

# Yet... tourism is less sustainable than ever in real terms

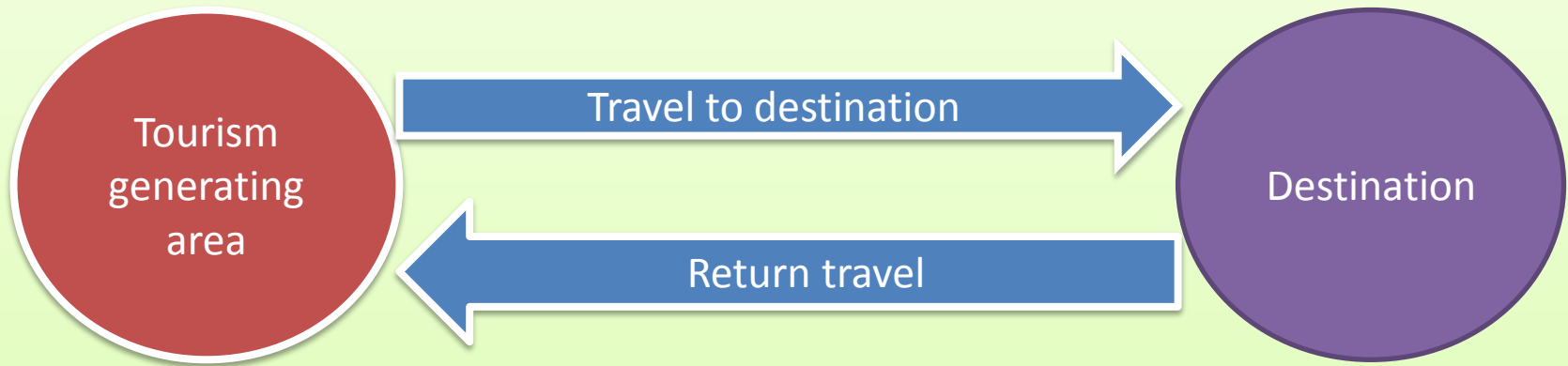
- In environmental terms:
  - More emissions in absolute terms
  - Greater resource use (energy, land use, water)
  - Contribution to biodiversity loss
  - From some measures its probably not that different from other forms of industrial development
- But then we keep being told... “one of the world's largest industries, employing more than 235 million people worldwide and generating some 9.2% of global GDP” (WTTC website)
- The growing contribution of tourism to environmental change while simultaneously being promoted as a means of economic growth suggests that sustainable tourism development is a significant policy problem. Maybe even a policy failure?
- Hall (2010): “much tourism growth, as with much economic growth in general, is already uneconomic at the present margin as we currently measure it given that it is leading to a clear running down of natural capital”.



# Understanding destinations?

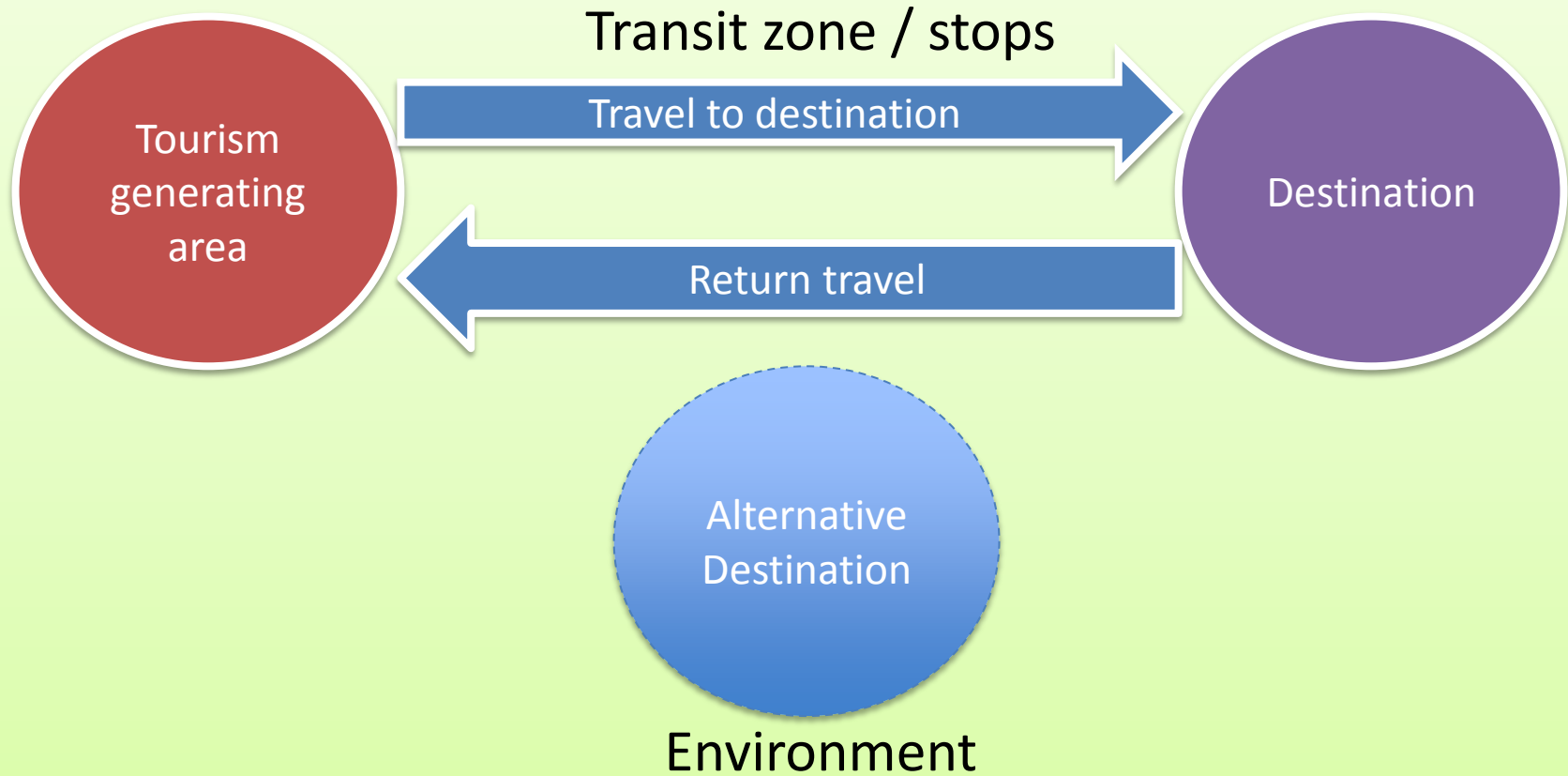


# Understanding destinations? (Don't forget the environment)

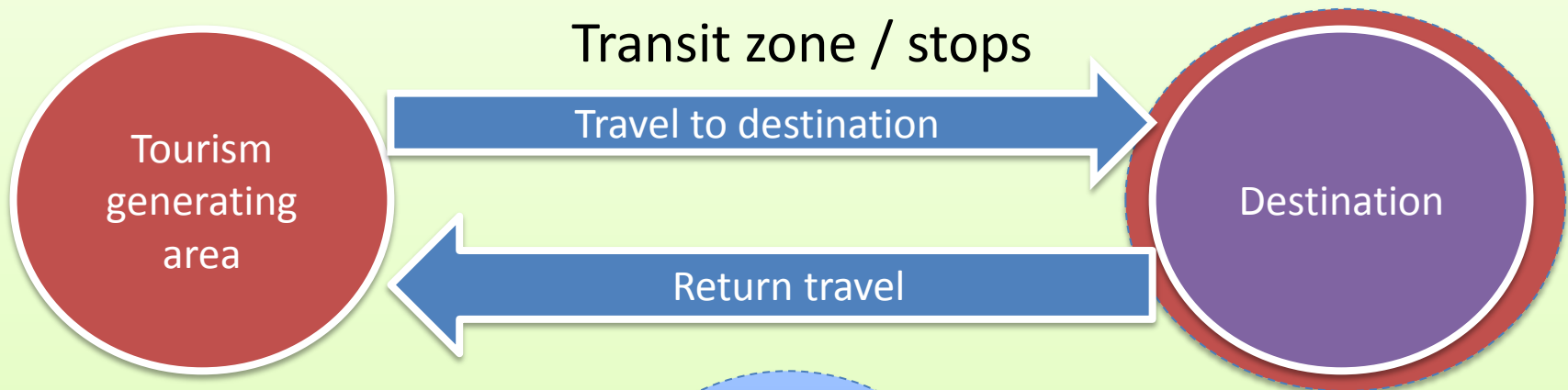


Environment

# Understanding destinations? (and the competitive context? Intervening opportunities, alternative destinations)



# And green growth? Is there even a fundamental contradiction between competitiveness and sustainability?



Environment

**What if the  
problem is more  
peak carbon than  
peak oil?**

# So what makes a place competitive?

- WHAT ARE WE COMPETING FOR
  - *mobile people* (whether as migrants with desired skills and/or capital, students, and tourists) and
  - *mobile capital* (investment, firm location or relocation)
  - *Retaining people and capital*
  - What indicators do we use?

PRIMARY: *Accessibility and place competition*

- Tourism does not occur randomly in space – and you have to be able to get there.
- Place marketing can help change perceptions of accessibility and distance

BUT: *Can you treat a destination or place in the same way as a firm?*

# Being competitive

- Discourse of regional competitiveness and destination competitiveness
- Competition, whether it be as a tourism destination or in a wider sense of regional competitiveness, is usually portrayed as a 'given' and what places 'must' do.
- Competitiveness is also a discourse that 'provides some shared sense of meaning and a means of legitimizing neo-liberalism rather than a material focus on the actual improvements of economic welfare (Bristow 2005: 300).
- Many policies at different levels of the state, as well as policy documents from industry present the concept of competitiveness in an unproblematic manner as an unambiguously beneficial attribute of a regional economy or of a destination.
- Competitiveness is portrayed as the means by which regional economies are externally validated in an era of globalization, such that there can be no principled objection to policies and strategies deemed to be competitiveness enhancing, whatever their indirect consequences (Bristow 2005: 285).

# Place competition

- The identification of competitiveness as a significant policy goal has led to the development of indicators that model and measure competitiveness. Thereby, identifying which places are winning in the ‘Premier League’ of place competition (e.g. various reports of the World Economic Forum).
- YET there is still substantial confusion ‘as to what the concept actually means and how it can be effectively operationalised... policy acceptance of the existence of regional competitiveness and its measurement appears to have run ahead of a number of fundamental theoretical and empirical questions’ (Bristow 2005: 286).
- Markusen (1999: 870): ‘fuzzy concepts’:
  - ‘characterizations lacking conceptual clarity and difficult to operationalize. In some cases, no attempt is made to offer evidence at all. Elsewhere, evidence marshalled is highly selective. Methodology is little discussed’. Nevertheless, more often than not, it is accepted.

# High Road/Low Road

- The fact that not everyone can win does not mean that competition is without value. Rather it is to suggest that there are both benefits and problems inherent in such place competition.
- Tourism is primarily seen as part of an imitative ‘low road’ policy in contrast to ‘high-road’ knowledge based policies.
  - The disadvantages of competition mainly concern the perils that low-road strategies build so that no strengths can prevail over the long term’ (Malecki 2004: 1103).
- Low-road strategies are regarded as being focused on ‘traditional’ location factors such as land, labour, capital, infrastructure and location, more intangible factors, such as intellectual capital and institutional capacity are secondary. Low-road strategies are bound up with the property-oriented growth machines that focus on the packaging of place product and the gaining of media attention. Investment in infrastructure is similar place to place.
- Differentiation as part of a high-road approach



# So what do we find?

- There is often an assumption that because tourism occurs in a region then it must constitute development
- Sustainable growth vs development
- Thinking about destinations and place *must* be different than thinking about tourism businesses and organisations
- Insufficient consideration of
  - Opportunity costs and economic alternatives
  - Supply, infrastructure and employment linkages
  - Firm ownership
  - Indigenous vs exogenous investment
  - Transport
  - Resource and locational constraints
  - Most importantly of all, what regions and communities are actually wanting to achieve

# But can places succeed with tourism?

- Some places obviously are better positioned than others for reasons of accessibility as well as capital - economic, intellectual and social
- But what are we wanting in economic terms
  - People travelling through?
  - People stopping?
  - People stopping and spending?
  - People stopping/staying longer and therefore spending more?

# Travelling through

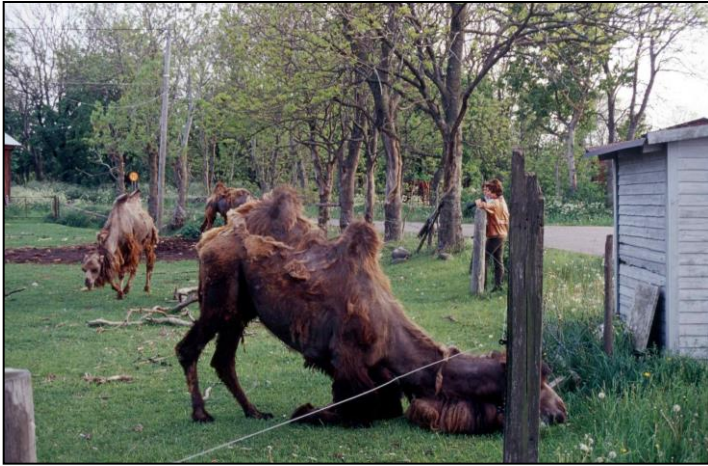


# Getting people to stop... and spend

- The reality is that for many locations your doing well if you can just get people to stop and spend - even just a small amount of money may be enough to keep a store going and help retain jobs
- Implications of “space-time prism”, “intervening opportunities”, “attraction shadows”, and constraints
- Importance of the toilet stop



# Getting people to stop...



# Stay longer and spend

- As tourists
- As second home owners
- As seasonal workers
- As students
- VFR



# Short-term: Retaining the spend

- How do businesses/firms cooperate?
- To what extent does expenditure circulate through the local economy?
- Emphasising local purchase
  - Good for local business, eg tourism - food links, tourism - construction, tourism - existing industry links very important
  - Good for reinforcing the local ‘brand’

# Medium term: Develop networks and relationships

- Network relations: economic - communication - mobility networks/paths all interrelated
- Focus on creating understanding and trust not producing pieces of paper (which are often for show that we have done something or to help get money out of the bank or treasury)
  - cross-sectoral relations require meeting spaces
  - role of champions and keystone individuals/firms
  - But they will take some time to develop and some efforts will not work



# Longer term: Develop capital

- Intellectual capital is critical
  - knowledge base/people
  - protection of innovation issues
- Develop complex networks - related to both economic and social capital
- Danger of swapping dependencies
- BEYOND TOURISM?
- Importance of broader government policies with respect to education, service provision
- Tourism **must be** a means to an end, not an end in itself

# The Answer? The Question?

- To be a successful contributor to destinations and regional development:
  - expectations must be realistic for tourism, e.g. seasonality issues, how many people can you really / want to attract? What sort of tourism?
  - tourism must be integrated in with wider regional development strategies
  - social and intellectual capital is as important than infrastructure - in some cases more important
  - its about getting people to stay as long as possible – thinking about ‘new markets’

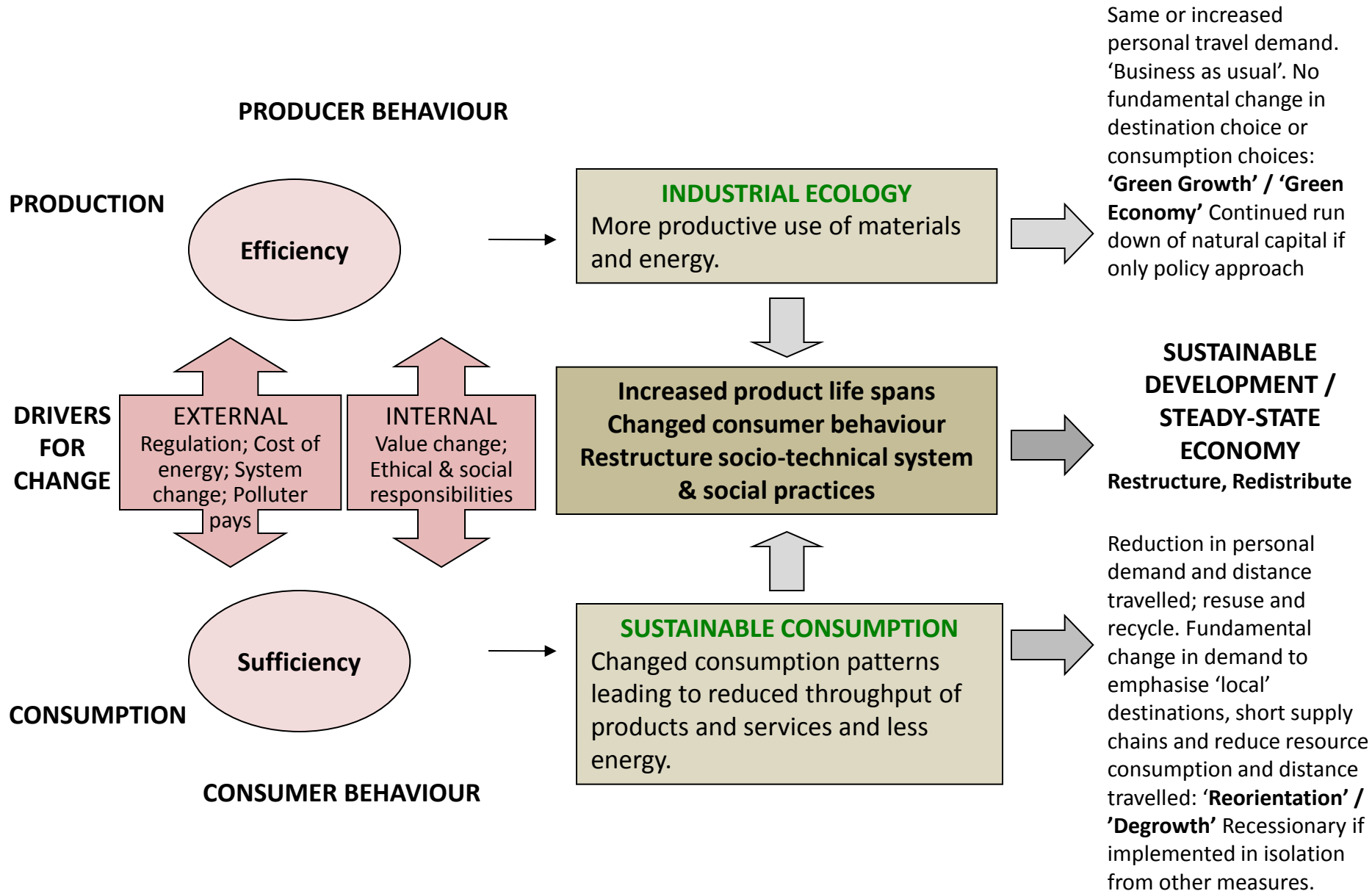
# Increased accessibility creates new issues

- Much focus on accessibility, but...
  - Local control of the development process
  - How many people do you actually want given desired quality of life and environment goals
  - External firms are more likely to move in and out-compete local firms
  - Place-owned firms are an appropriate response of more peripheral regions
  - Sustainability must also consider the environment and equity (welfare)

# Can destinations become sustainable?

- Requires a reduction in the drawdown of natural capital and throughput in absolute terms not just per capita – the old fashioned idea of sustained yield
  1. Attention to efficiency / industrial ecology (a green economic approach that focuses on more productive use of materials and energy)
  2. Focus on sufficiency / sustainable consumption (focusing on reducing throughput)

# Figure Efficiency and sufficiency in tourism and sustainability



# Sustainable consumption strategies

- Limiting visitor numbers / extending length of stay / focusing on yield
- Emphasis on shorter-haul markets
- Taxes /charging / offsetting
- Special funds / having appropriate transfers of funds from central government to regions to deal with “real populations”
- Zoning
- Behavioural change campaigns / social marketing

But, fundamentally it is political and usually based on short-termism – Do you have the willingness to challenge and change?