

Strategic Environmental Assessment in a New Zealand Context

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In New Zealand strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is not a commonly applied term, however, there are examples where the broad principles of SEA have been directed towards policies and plans. These principles have been employed for both the development of new plans and policies, as well as to plan changes, including national policy statements, regional plans, and land and water management plans (Taylor and Morgan, 2016). The Resource Management Act (RMA) is one such instance in New Zealand where SEA concepts are reflected in legislation. For instance, the RMA focuses on ensuring sustainable management, refers to 'effects-based' assessments, and emphasises the need for public participation. Specifically under the RMA, Section 32 (s32) is used as a tool to analyse plans and policies (Morgan, 2016), albeit, it is much less focused on an integrated environmental outlook, instead placing more prominence on economic considerations (Taylor and Morgan, 2016). Additionally, s32 reports tend to lack systematic analysis, with heavy weighting given to procedure rather than being outcome-focused, and they often have a deficiency in the testing of alternative options for effects (Morgan 2016). That said, s32 reports are not the only instance in New Zealand where the standards of SEA are applied to policies, plans, and programmes.

Examples of SEA in New Zealand

The subsequent examples are not explicitly titled as SEAs and although they do not necessarily follow an SEA framework, they contain a number of aspects, which are shared with SEA. The National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management provides an example of where multidisciplinary teams worked collaboratively with various stakeholders and the community to develop a national policy, reflecting the SEA principle of early engagement with the community (Taylor and Morgan, 2016).

At a regional level, Environment Canterbury, via the Canterbury Water Management Strategy, placed importance on collaboration as part of their strategic planning, as well as the inclusion of participatory methods. Their approach included the SEA philosophy of having a well-researched baseline by ensuring that a social baseline was established before applying different scenarios of land-use change to assess the potential effects of a variety of policy and planning options (Taylor and Mackay, 2016).

Another application of SEA principles in New Zealand includes the Canterbury District Health Board's Health in All Policies team (HiAP), whose aim is to ensure that public policies, plans, and strategies across all sectors consider health outcomes. To meet this aim HiAP have worked collaboratively with local councils to establish strategies across the different tiers of governance, from board level to operational level. They have also written integrated assessments based on social, environmental, economic, and cultural values, for incorporation into plans. In addition, the HiAP have invited the community and stakeholders to make recommendations on early strategy drafts (Murray, 2016).

Is SEA working in New Zealand?

In New Zealand, in many instances, SEA is being undertaken but not via an SEA framework per se or under the title of SEA (Taylor and Morgan, 2016). The examples above illustrate the application of certain SEA principles, including early and active community participation; collaboration and a tiered approach with links to other processes; evidence based assessment with a well-researched baseline; assessment of the potential effects of proposals; and an integrated approach which considers all aspects of the environment (including ecological, social, cultural, and economic systems). However, many of the principles of SEA are often lacking from these assessments or are not considered in thorough detail. This is clearly evident in the majority of s32 reports, New Zealand's closest formal equivalent to SEA, where reports often take a weak approach, becoming a 'tick box' exercise rather than being outcome-focused.

SEA's potential in New Zealand

So there are gaps which need to be addressed if SEA is to be achieved comprehensively and consistently in New Zealand. Specialists have identified some specific strategies which would benefit from the application of SEA, such as the predator-free New Zealand project, which will involve many partners, including NGOs, communities and government agencies. In this instance it has been recognised that SEA could be used to apply a consistent framework across the different project locations (Russell and Taylor, 2016). It has also been acknowledged that SEA has the potential of assessing broader issues like climate change, including tipping and turning points, for the country's primary industries. For example, SEA would help with on-farm decisions by identifying thresholds and resilience indicators, resulting in more resilient communities with improved adaptation abilities (Cradock-Henry, 2016). In addition, practitioners have seen the need for SEA in the tourism sector where public and private sector management are combined. It has been identified that SEA would improve the government's current reactive approach to one which is more proactive (Simmons, 2016).

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It is clear that while there are the foundations and potential for SEA in New Zealand, there is not a common understanding of what constitutes SEA, which is likely a reflection that there are no clear guidelines on SEA principles or a framework of reference. There is legislation which hints at the concept of SEA, such as the RMA and its s32, although it appears that if this is to form the basis of SEA in New Zealand it will require some extensive reworking. Therefore, it could be that a combination of legislative changes, as well a clear SEA guiding framework, would assist New Zealand in realising its SEA potential.

References

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