Strategic Social Assessment in an Integrated, Collaborative Approach to Setting Limits for the Waitaki Catchment: Poster Summary

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Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is the application of assessment techniques, including social assessment, to the preparation and implementation of policies and plans. Under the National Policy Statement on Freshwater Management, regional councils are working with local authorities and stakeholders to set limits to water abstractions and water quality – SEA is a key part of the assessment process.

In Canterbury, Environment Canterbury, working under the direction of the Canterbury Water Management Strategy, is implementing a collaborative approach to the strategic planning and setting of limits, integrating participatory methods and technical assessments. Our poster reports the approach taken in the Waitaki Catchment.

The Catchment was divided into the Upper and Lower Zones for technical assessment: a 'current state' (social baseline) was produced first for each area and then the catchment as a whole. Supporting documents included a demographic profile of the catchment and reports on a recreation survey and travel cost valuation of recreation. Land-use change scenarios where then developed and considered alongside a range of policy and planning options, using inputs from other technical assessments, e.g., land uses, nutrients, surface and ground water quality, and stream and lake ecology. Bio-physical effects were considered for their social consequences. (For instance, water quality and ecological effects are important for recreational use and tourist activity). Economic effects were also considered, such as greater or less employment on population levels, community vitality and the ability to maintain social services such as local schools. Assessments were then made against criteria based on social outcomes, sub outcomes and technical indicators that were agreed by the Zone Committee.

We suggest that the skills needed for effective SEA include the ability to: communicate and integrate technical matters; conceptualise bio-physical changes through to their social consequences; listen to various points of view and in particular value local input and knowledge. Project management skills are also needed including good coordination, time planning and ability to work to deadlines. Planners, impact assessors and scientists, community members and stakeholders need to communicate and work together for achievable results. We argue that integrated SEA can assist collaborative planning processes, bringing together local communities and technical experts. The overall objective should be improved and fairer, environmental and social outcomes. Well-integrated SEA supports successful implementation of formal plans to achieve multiple outcomes (tested and adapted by ongoing monitoring that includes social data and local knowledge).