

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) An Introduction

PRACTICE WORKSHOP AT THE NZAIA CONFERENCE 2022

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What is SEA?

Apply impact assessment thinking to higher level policy and planning processes

- ensure social, cultural and environmental aspects are included in considerations
- anticipatory, to inform emerging policies, plans, programmes
- Pay attention to the unintended direct and indirect effects of proposals, both adverse and beneficial
- participatory, inclusive

Terminology:

- “environment” in the wider sense, not limited to natural environmental systems

Introduction to the Workshop

Introductions

The purpose of the workshop is to introduce SEA as an important part of impact assessment practice in Aotearoa NZ

Our focus is on what SEA is – the basic components

How SEA is practised in Aotearoa NZ

And how SEA can contribute to better policy and planning and enhanced wellbeing outcomes

Brief international perspective

Forms of SEA in over 60 countries

- esp EU through a Directive; also wider group under Espoo Convention

Strong European influence on SEA development

- EIA style models, often a biophysical emphasis

But SEA also promoted by UN and its agencies (UNEP, UNECE, etc.), WHO, OECD/DAC, and esp the World Bank, ADB, etc.

Closer to home:

- Australia, the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 requires strategic assessments of policies, plans, programmes
- Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) published SEA guidelines in 2016

What SEA can contribute ?

Strategic policy and planning

- rational models very focused on achieving desired outcomes (eg wellbeing, sustainability, equity), typically to solve a problem
- monitor and evaluate, revise strategic instruments and press on
 - “impact assessment” in this context considers ‘have the outcomes been achieved’

Often there is limited consideration of wider implications, around the problem area

- especially those that arise through indirect pathways...

SEA widens the consideration of context and potential consequences

SEA helps to address complex issues

The strategic level is particularly suited to analysis of cumulative effects

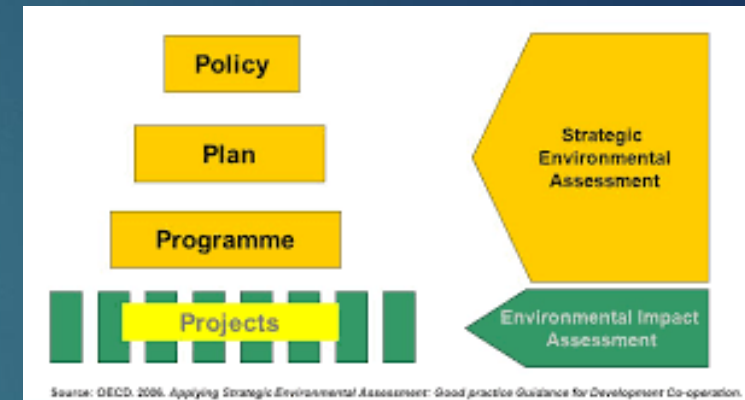
- multiple projects across a region (e.g. forestry conversions in dairy region); or on a given resource (e.g. dams on a river or groundwater extractions)
- to recognise other existing, permitted or proposed actions
- for wider geographic and temporal range
- for diffuse (non point) effects
- to identify “boundaries”
- ▶ e.g. carrying capacities, environmental thresholds, limits of acceptable change



Tiering and cumulative effects

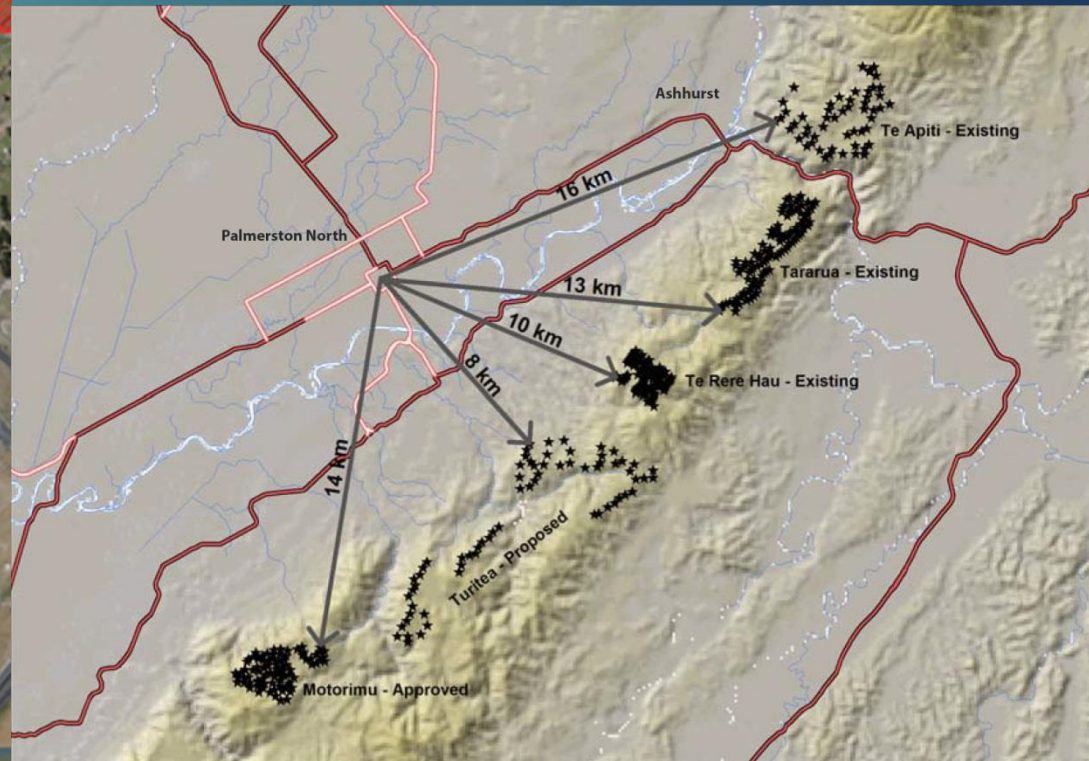
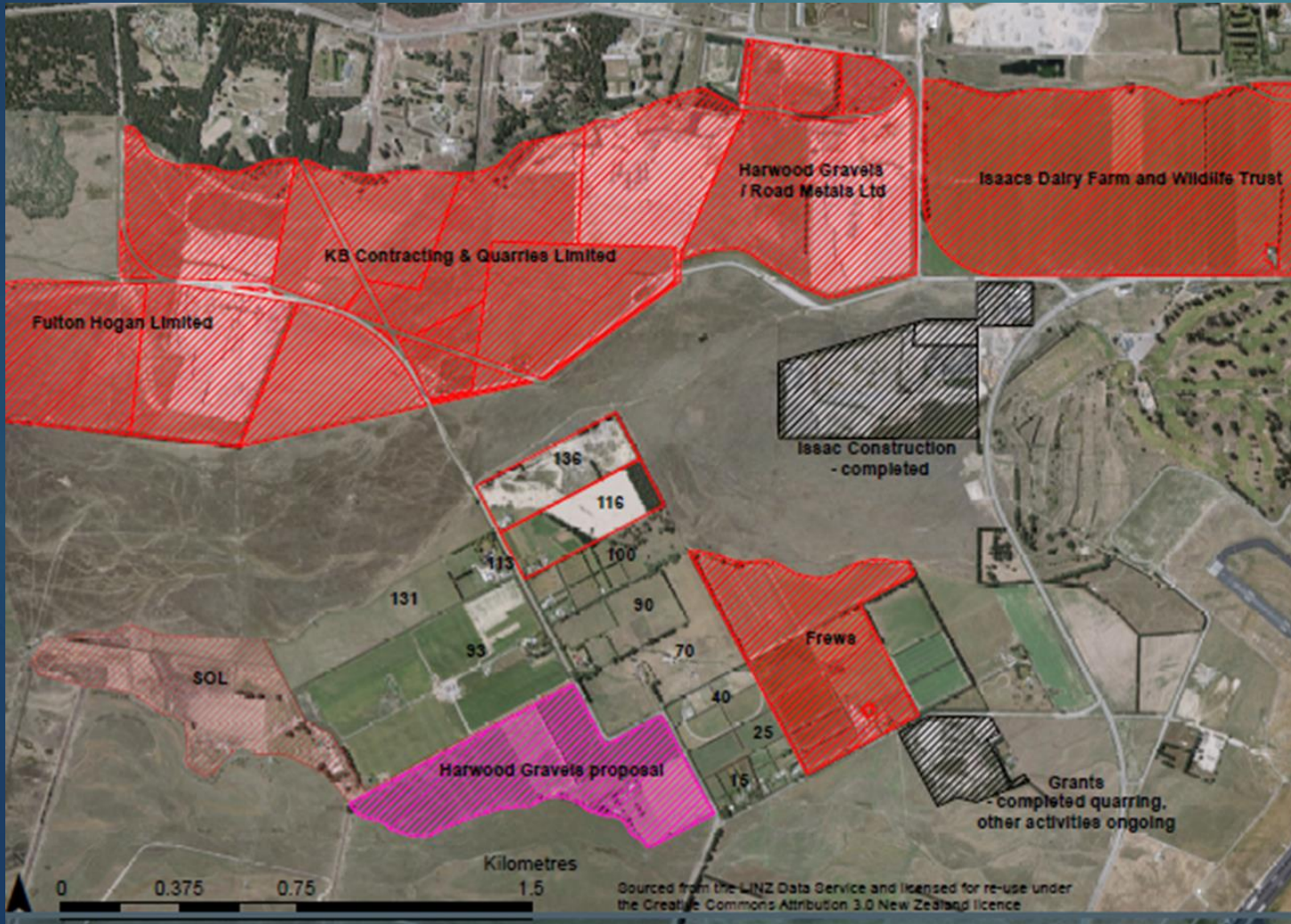
Tiered decision-making, policy to plans to projects

- SEA for upper levels, EIA/AEE for projects
- SEA prepares the ground for project IA
 - e.g. the Chatham Rise phosphate proposal
- Project IAs benefit from well developed policies, rules and standards to work with when informing decisions
- Development plans are an effective way to manage cumulative effects, defining what activities (and how many) are suited to a location
- For example quarry or wind farm development



Examples of cumulative effects

- Quarry development near Christchurch
- Windfarm development near Palmerston North



SEA theory: models and methodology

A great deal of discussion and debate!

Simple typology:

- SEA carried out on draft policies/plans/programmes, to assess their wider environmental, social, cultural implications (*EIA model*). Gives limited ability to change a proposal
- SEA part of the policy and plan making process, to ensure they consider sustainability, and avoid/reduce impacts on environment, people, etc. throughout (ie, *embedded SEA throughout*)

Doing SEA...*EIA model*

Carried out as separate activity, typically separate teams

- runs alongside policy/plan processes
- triggered at key development points, eg., draft proposals produced
- SEA evaluates the process, and assesses wider impacts
- provides feedback, informs revision of proposals and plan writing

Broadly follows standard IA approach

- scoping (incl stakeholder consultation)
- baseline description
- forecasting/prediction
- significance evaluation
- impact management recommendations and report

EIA-style SEA: common issues

Managing relationships between teams is important

- to be supportive not adversarial...
- Integration not properly considered from the start

Engagement is not fully integrated

Timing is important

- if proposals are too far down the road, it is hard to make changes...

Doing SEA...*embedded model*

SEA specialists within policy/plan team

- help plan studies, to ensure relevant social, cultural and environmental factors recognised
 - to set capacity/threshold boundaries for emerging policies/plans
- support analysis of potential wider impacts
 - avoid/mitigate adverse impacts, look to enhance beneficial impact if practical

Methods: less structured, more flexible

- degree of structure would depend on context (e.g. land use planning versus housing policy?)
- impact assessment component would follow standard IA approach
- sustainability analyses based on variety of tools, to suit context
 - modelling, GIS, etc.

Need for integration

Managing internal relationships important

- SEA thinking needs to be adopted by whole team developing a policy or plan
- SEA specialists facilitate that thinking, not own it...
- Include cultural perspectives from the start (mana whenua participants)
- Allow time for transferring knowledge within a team in suitable forms
- Involve plan writers in the assessment process including in community engagement



Hybrid model....?

Embedded model can still benefit from an external check

And the EIA model benefits if the policy/planning team internalise sustainability and anticipatory thinking

SEA in Aotearoa NZ

Not formalised as “SEA”, but some SEA-type processes

- s32 under the RMA is most obvious
- regulatory impact assessment at Cabinet level
- Local Government Act 2002 (as amended 2019) has relevant language
- emerging use of LSF and He Ara Waiora

Plus a variety of ad hoc approaches in evidence

Discussion?

s32 evaluations (1)

Show how options were considered, and demonstrates efficiency and effectiveness of chosen option

- assess benefits and costs of the environmental, economic, social, and cultural effects that are anticipated

Great potential for SEA-style analyses, and there are some very good examples

- but frequently the accountability function overshadows the effects assessment

s32 evaluations (2)

Effects assessments often lack key SEA components

- esp weak on public participation, impact forecasting, consideration of significance, and mitigation and monitoring

Reports themselves often technical and bureaucratic, as somehow evidence of accountability

- Often rely heavily on time and resource heavy quantitative models (eg hydrology/nutrient or transport models)
- not written to summarise and communicate the substantive findings on effects to the general public

Frustrations experienced moving from assessment to plan writing

The future of s32 – “evaluation of plans” ?

"Section 32 reports have become hopelessly long-winded, post-fact justifications and are hardly used. We're putting an end to this waste. They're going to have to be expressed succinctly and plainly, be proportionate to the scale of the proposal, and be prepared in a way that's useful to a decision maker. We're also legislating for an evaluation report to be limited if it's giving effect to a provision in the National Planning Framework."

Minister Parker, Introducing NBE Bill, 1st Reading.

Regulatory impact assessment (1)

Administered by Treasury, routinely used for proposals to Cabinet

Research prior to 2017 showed problems with RIAs as a form of IA:

- little or no scoping; weak impact identification; emphasis on economic impacts, lack of environmental or social impacts; a focus on direct impacts only; little or no consideration of monitoring...

Revised guidance in 2017 emphasised purpose of RIA was to encourage “more transparent and robust policy-making”

- assessments now expected to include consultation with stakeholders and affected parties, a balanced analysis of impacts and independent quality assurance, and plans for monitoring, evaluation and review.

Regulatory impact assessment (2)

Expected to use a template, emphasis on weighing options, including status quo

- in Treasury view, effects/impacts should be given monetary values whenever possible

Prospects?

- looking to merge LSF and RIA into more comprehensive, integrated assessment tool
- still require an IA framework to guide exploration of wider unintended consequences
- will have to use *qualitative* data more often

SEA in Aotearoa NZ outside RMA

Land transport plans

Conservation and national park plans

Predator free NZ assessments

Forest certification

Tourism strategies

District gambling policies

Local housing strategies

Iwi plans



“Integrated Assessment”

Developed in Canterbury to assess a number of policies and plans including post-earthquake land use and recovery

Facilitated, multi stakeholder workshops

Strong sustainability thinking

Designed to inform development of plans and policies through early iterations (embedded considerations)

<https://www.cph.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/IntegratedAssessmentGuide.pdf>

Future of SEA in Aotearoa NZ

Does SEA have a role in this country?

Institutional evaluation processes (s32, RIA, etc...)

- would they benefit from closer adherence to an SEA model?

Ad hoc policy and plan assessments

- how can they be supported to avoid re-inventing SEA, transfer lessons, etc.

Some useful resources

Ministry for the Environment 2017. A Guide to Section 32 of the Resource Management Act 1991.

<https://www.mfe.govt.nz/sites/default/files/media/RMA/guide-to-section-32-of-resource-managemnt-amendment-act-1991.pdf>

Morgan, R. and Taylor, C. N. (2021). Strategic environmental assessment in New Zealand. Chapter 21 in Fischer, T.B. and González, A. (Eds). Handbook of Strategic Environmental Assessment. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. pp. 332-348. [DOI: 10.4337/9781789909937.00035](https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789909937.00035)

New Zealand Treasury 2019. Guide to Cabinet's Impact Analysis Requirements, December 2019.

<https://treasury.govt.nz/publications/guide/guide-cabinets-impact-analysis-requirements>