



Environmental Impact Assessment

Description

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is the process of analysing and managing intended and unintended consequences of planned developments or other interventions on the environment, including those linked to tourism. It is widely practised in many countries in a wide variety of forms. In New Zealand, under the [Resource Management Act \(RMA\) framework](#) an EIA is commonly referred to as an Assessment of Environmental Effects (AEE). As the environment is broadly defined in the RMA to include people, communities, culture, heritage and amenity, an AEE can include an assessment of all these aspects of the environment if relevant to the intervention in question.

A full EIA typically brings together all the various components of technical assessment of effects, often as separate sections in the report, including, for example, ecological, physical, landscape, social, economic, health and other components. An effect (while the word impact is used internationally the word effect is preferred in NZ) is broadly defined to include positive and negative effects, short and long term effects, and cumulative effects. Usually analysis of effects includes an assessment of their likely scale and probability.

EIA systems include the legal framework for conducting and administering EIAs, including processes for public involvement, [monitoring](#) and impact mitigation.

How and when the tool is used

EIA is most typically used in the planning stages of a project that has implications for the environment. Typical large-scale tourism projects that would require EIA include, for example, planning and building a resort in or near a natural area, developing a new ski area, or for building waste management facilities or transport infrastructure, such as an access road, marina or jetty. It also applies in a more abbreviated form for smaller developments such as a hotel extension, expansion of a traffic route, etc., with the EIA at a level of detail appropriate to the likely potential effects of the proposal.

While use of the tool has generally been used for project planning, there is increasing application at the strategic level, around the formulation and implementation of plans and policies. This use is generally called strategic environmental assessment (SEA). Strategic uses of EIA for tourism would examine, for example, the appropriate level of urban development and landscape change in an area, perhaps in order to develop a zoning plan or a large resort development. Here SEA for tourism development is commonly linked to the use of other tools such as [cumulative effects assessment](#) and [structure plans](#).

Elements of the EIA process are similar to those utilised in social and other forms of impact assessment. They include (depending on scale of the assessment):

- *scoping* to identify the full range of key issues and effects using techniques such as [webbing and chaining](#), and [stakeholder analysis](#) and establish processes of consultation;
- *baseline studies* to describe the existing environment and likely changes without the planned intervention;
- *development and assessment of alternatives* in the context of local and regional policies and plans established under the RMA framework and the [Conservation Act framework](#);
- *assessment of effects* of the selected alternative during both development/construction and operation/implementation;
- *monitoring and mitigation* to manage and mitigate effects and enhance benefits including feedback into future tourism strategies and plans.

EIAs take a wide range of forms and content and can involve a number of specialised experts for large proposals. For smaller projects, the whole EIA may be prepared and presented by the applicant. They are generally prepared in New Zealand as part of the resource consent process under the RMA. They may also be required in other jurisdictions such as when a concession application is made to the Department of Conservation (DOC). There is a good range of supporting material and advice available from the Ministry for the Environment.

When a consent application is made to a consenting authority (local or regional government) for a decision over which the council has discretion, the authority will sometimes call for submissions from affected parties or the public on the consent and associated environmental documents. The authority will then prepare a



report on the consent including technical review of the content of the AEE. Subsequently the AEE is submitted to further scrutiny at a public hearing prior to a decision being made by a council committee or an independent commissioner. In some cases, where a consent is appealed, the AEE is revised and then scrutinised in the form of technical evidence to an Environment Court hearing. While this process is robust it can lead to unnecessary duplication of EIA effort by proponents and submitters and in some cases by the consenting authority as well.

Application

A common criticism of the application of EIA relates to its timing, that it is not used early enough in the planning process, for example to help examine options and alternatives more carefully. Another is that it is not used in the implementation stage, utilising systematic monitoring to inform the management of change, utilizing tools such as [adaptive management](#) ❖.

Strategic applications would see greater use of EIA to assist in the development of policies and plans relating to tourism, including in the general RMA and Conservation Act frameworks, and also in relation to sector specific policies and local area [regional and district tourism plans](#) ❖. Strategic application should include consideration of the carrying capacity of the host community, at the most basic level focusing on infrastructure such as water, sanitation and waste disposal, housing, health services and other social services. However, an integrated approach would also consider longer term changes affecting the environment (ecosystems) and social-cultural conditions such as employment, amenity values, cost of living, local recreation activity and ways of life.

Evidence of host community resistance to large-scale tourism proposals and cumulative change in some areas highlights the need to develop a better process for planning and management of change utilising EIA. The challenging shift to a more thorough approach to sustainable management can take place under the current RMA and associated management objectives and also under [Long Term Council Community Plans](#) ❖. There are also established procedures and techniques to assist with the aim of greater community involvement in planning and assessment processes.

There is considerable potential to apply EIA more consistently alongside tools of [visitor impact management](#) ❖ and approaches to defining and managing [limits of acceptable change](#) ❖.

Our evaluation

The place of EIA is well established in New Zealand and it has potential to be used as a key integrating tool in sustainable tourism planning and management. However, this potential will not be fully realised until EIA is itself better integrated. Too often the various technical or discipline-based components of an EIA are stitched together after a series of specific reports are compiled. In particular, the key components of public involvement and social-cultural assessments are often not included fully until the bio-physical components are largely complete and the need for a wider perspective is painfully obvious to the developer or administrative agency. The change to a more integrative approach to EIA must therefore come at all levels including the environmental experts, tourism developers, agencies and host communities.