

Foreword

For those of us who want environmental assessment (EA) to actually *do* something – improve decisions by ensuring that they integrate environmental considerations, rather than just produce handsome and useless reports – it is clear that the focus of EA needs to be firmly on the decision-making process. Only in guidelines and pipe-dreams does EA follow an elegant rational procedural path from screening through to monitoring, with a nicely assessed and massaged plan as a by-product (shown as a box labelled ‘revised plan’ pointed at by an arrow from the EA process). In practice, *effective* EA is all about making the right comment at the right meeting to get the right person to consider something that they had not thought of before.

We are currently being bombarded with new legislation and guidance, with boxes and arrows, with idealized rational decision-making flowcharts. The European Directive on strategic environmental assessment requires legislation and guidance to be implemented in each of the European member states, and other countries worldwide are establishing procedures for strategic environmental assessment. This very timely book on ‘analytical strategic environmental assessment’ (ANSEA) deals head-on with the decision-making systems that these regulations and guidance documents are supposed to influence.

ANSEA focuses on the quality of the decision-making process rather than on the impacts of the decision; on describing the decision process rather than the output of the decisions and ensuring full integration of environmental values in decision making. The approach was developed by an international star team with extensive theoretical and practical experience with EA.

To my mind, ANSEA makes several enormously important contributions to our understanding of how to make EA effective. First, it acknowledges and clarifies that decision making is not always the rational process that the flowcharts assume. Decision making is often messy, unpredictable, non-sequential. Particularly at the strategic level, uncertainties make it difficult to predict impacts. Any EA system needs to take this on board.

Second, it defines the important concept of the ‘decision window’. Even as children we know when it makes sense to influence our parents to buy us sweets/ toys/ jeans with strategically-placed holes, and when that just isn’t an option. Yet, with EA we often persist in symbolically considering options that were closed off months ago or in requesting more time for detailed studies

when decisions are being made *now*. The concept of the ‘decision window’ helps to focus EA on those decision makers and times that really matter.

Finally, ANSEA helps to ensure that environmental values are fully integrated into decision making by giving some very logical and manageable rules for how decisions should be made in terms of their inputs, analyses and outputs. Decisions should be comprehensive, timely, transparent, participative and credible. This gives a nice checklist for SEA practitioners and decision makers.

Of course, ANSEA is not the universal panacea. It is – currently and on paper, at least – bulky. It assumes a prescience about the specific EA decision-making process which is unlikely to be found in practice. It will need more pilots and case studies to test just how well it works. On the other hand, I feel that the ANSEA approach could easily be expanded to cover sustainability as well as environmental issues.

This book should be essential reading for anyone who is trying to improve decisions and particularly for all of us, EA practitioners, who are trying to figure out how to fit those nice theoretical flowcharts to the real-life messes that we constantly seem to meet.

Riki Therivel