Assessing the social effects of conservation

This summary of Cosslett et al. (2004) is for DOC staff who are familiar with the full report, but require a quick-reference reminder. The report describes the social impact assessment process, presents conservation case studies to illustrate the process, and lists sources of further information. Central to the report is a social effects management framework which lists: potential effects arising from Departmental actions, stakeholders likely to be affected, possible mitigation and enhancement measures, and possible indicators for monitoring the effects.

Introduction

Social impact assessment (SIA) is the process of analysing, monitoring and managing the social consequences of development, be it a project, programme or policy. A development may have both positive and negative effects and different individuals, groups and communities will be affected in different ways. SIA endeavours to identify and analyse the ways in which these potential costs and benefits are distributed among the groups and individuals that make up a community.

An important objective of the process is to give a voice to the knowledge and experience of local people who might otherwise have no part in the decision-making process. The process builds on local knowledge and uses participatory processes to analyse the concerns of interested and affected parties.

The good practice of social impact assessment accepts that social, economic, and biophysical effects are inter-linked. The over-arching objective is to bring about a more ecologically, socio-culturally, and economically sustainable and equitable environment.

Although there are no statutory requirements on the Department to undertake SIA, it does represent best practice. Furthermore, it is one of the tools that staff can use to implement the Conservation with Communities Strategy. There are also moral and practical arguments for undertaking SIA. Local communities often object to conservation initiatives on the basis that they constrain social and economic development opportunities. Conservation initiatives which do not take account of local needs can impose costs (real or perceived) on neighbouring individuals and communities. Failing to demonstrate the benefits of conservation initiatives to local communities may mean your work is less likely to be supported and may even be actively opposed by local people. Such opposition can increase the cost of implementation and reduce the effectiveness of conservation outcomes.

Because of the immense scope of activities undertaken by the Department, and because every impact assessment scenario is unique, it is impossible to prescribe a set of steps that will fit all situations. Users should treat this summary (as they should treat the full report) as a guide to thinking about the social effects of their actions, not as a blueprint to a fixed procedure.
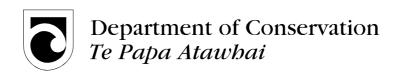
This summary describes 6 principal steps in the SIA process: screening to determine whether an impact assessment is required; developing project and community profiles; comparing profiles to identify possible effects; developing mitigation and enhancement strategies; identifying indicators to measure effects; and monitoring outcomes. Consultation plays a central role (see full report for guidance).

Step one—Screening

Screening is the process of identifying which projects warrant a social impact assessment and the scale of assessment that will be required. Screening ensures that proposals that should be assessed for their effects are not missed out, but also that assessments are not carried out unnecessarily (Barrow 1997).

Screening typically employs criteria to determine when a SIA is appropriate. Appropriate criteria for a SIA include (after Barrow 1997):

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• The proposal is likely to bring changes to the quality of life experienced by neighbours and/or residents in the local community (e.g. a change that is expected to increase pressure on roads in the area, or on services in the neighbouring town)

• The site affected by the proposal is sensitive (e.g. neighbours currently enjoy a quiet setting which could be adversely affected by new tourism activities)

• The proposal involves known or suspected social costs (e.g. one or more groups within the community will lose access to the area for their recreational pursuits, or neighbours may experience increased incidence of trespass)

• The proposal involves an issue known to be controversial (e.g. aerial sowing of poison for pest control, or control of conservation pests to which a high level of public interest is attached)

• There is a risk that the proposal will contribute to cumulative effects (e.g. an already popular recreational area will be visited by more people)

• There are unattractive input-output considerations (e.g. development will cause damage to vegetation along boundaries with neighbours, or will generate heavy traffic on local roads).

Does your proposal meet any of the above criteria? Some initial consultation with key stakeholders may be needed to decide (see full report for details). If your proposal meets one or more of the criteria then a SIA is warranted. The process is outlined in the following steps.

Step two—Profiling

This involves collecting background data on the proposal itself and on the potentially affected community.

Profiling the proposal

The first action is to gather information about all the relevant aspects of the proposal. The end result of this process is called a project profile (see Box 1).

Profiling the community

The next action is to gather information about the neighbouring community and the ways individuals and groups within the community interact with the project area. This involves describing the social characteristics and history of the area as a baseline for estimating the social effects of change (see Box 2).

Taylor et al. (1995) list appropriate data sources which should be consulted in compiling a community profile:

• Available statistical data, e.g. census reports (from Statistics New Zealand www.statistics.govt.nz), other data available from local and central government and private organisations

• Written social data on the local area, e.g. letters and articles in newspapers, written testimonies, histories, graduate theses, annual reports, research studies

• Observation and respondent contact data, e.g. talking and participating with people in the area in their work, leisure and other social settings

• Results of consultation exercises including meetings, interviews and surveys

• DOC staff are a source of descriptive data for the communities within which they live and work

Step three—Identify and evaluate possible effects

Comparing the project profile and the community profile helps to identify where potential effects lie. This step involves identifying the social phenomena that may be affected by the change, then predicting and evaluating the specific effects on individuals and communities.

For example, you might have identified several groups within the community who use the project area for recreation. The proposal may involve the restriction of recreational access to certain types of activities. Therefore those participating in the non-complying activities will be affected. Or the proposal may involve upgrading a track from tramping to walking standard. This will improve opportunities for some groups of users, thereby increasing the numbers of people visiting a previously remote area and possibly displacing those users who currently seek solitude there (see Box 3).

The process of identifying and evaluating effects (after Barrow 1997) may be broken down as follows:

- Identification of possible direct, indirect, and (as far as possible) cumulative effects
- Assessment of the significance of each effect (i.e. its extent and importance)
- Evaluation of the likelihood that an effect will occur—the expected frequency or distribution of its occurrence (this can be simply in terms of 'high', 'medium', and 'low')
- A forecast of when or how often the effects might be experienced

Section 3.3 of the full report includes discussion of some of the key methodological challenges involved in evaluating possible effects.

A primary method of identifying the effects on your neighbouring community is to consult with the potentially affected stakeholders identified through the community profiling exercise. Whatever consultation method(s) you use, you need to ensure respondents understand the proposal. You may need to provide a profile of the project. (Make sure it is clear and easy to understand. Visual aids are good, but need to be detailed enough so that people can grasp the implications of the project for themselves.) Ask them who they think is likely to be affected and in what ways. See Section 3.7 of the full report for information about consultation.

Types of effects

Depending on the nature of the proposal and the number of stakeholders with an interest in the area, there may be a wide range of possible effects. A convenient way of conceptualising social effects is as changes to one or more of the following:

- People's way of life—how they live, work, play and interact with one another on a day-to-day basis
- Their culture—their shared beliefs, customs, values and language
- Their community—its cohesion, stability, character, services and facilities
- Their political systems—the extent to which people are able to participate in decisions that affect their lives
- Their environment—the quality of the air and water; the level of hazard or risk, dust and noise they are exposed to; the adequacy of sanitation; and their access to and control over resources
- Their health and wellbeing (health is a state of physical, mental, social, and spiritual wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity)
- Their personal and property rights—particularly whether people are economically affected, or experience personal disadvantage which may include a violation of their civil liberties
- Their fears and aspirations—their perceptions about their safety, their fears about the future of their community, and their aspirations for their future and the future of their children (IAIA 2003).

Step four—Develop mitigation and enhancement measures

Once likely positive and negative effects are identified, you can use that knowledge to work out how to maximise the benefits to the community while minimising the negative effects. See the social effects management framework (Section 6 of the full report) for examples of possible mitigation and enhancement measures in response to the effects identified.

Potential mitigation and enhancement measures are likely to be raised by participants during consultation for the effects identification process. A good idea is to ask participants in the consultation process how their concerns might be addressed. It is critical, however, that you

make clear to them the constraints (practical, financial, and political) that will influence your ability to adopt suggestions.

Some measures identified may be minor, and easily accommodated within the proposal. Others may require significant changes to the design of the project, or to the way the project will be managed and/ or operated. Procedures for including such measures will need to be approved at the appropriate level, and worked into project plans. Note that DOC need not be solely responsible for the mitigation and enhancement measures identified (see details in Section 3.4 of the full report).

Step five—Identify indicators to measure effects

Depending on what is identified in the profiling and effects identification stages, some or all of the changes resulting from the development may be monitored. You will need to monitor the effectiveness of any mitigation and enhancement measures adopted. For this you will need to identify appropriate indicators, measure, and assess them relative to a baseline established before any changes were made. Indicators are pieces of specific information that reflect the status of large systems. They provide a way of seeing the big picture by looking at smaller pieces of it. They tell us which direction a system is going: up or down, forward or backward, getting better or worse, or staying the same. Indicators are typically used to measure progress towards the achievement of outcomes.

In the effects assessment process there are two instances where you may need to use indicators:

• To describe predicted effects (changes)
• To measure actual effects relative to the baseline (see Step six, next)

The social effects management framework (see Table 3 in the full report) provides ideas on possible indicators for measuring various effects, and possible sources of such data. Section 3.5 includes a wider discussion of indicators and measurement issues.

Step six—Monitoring

Monitoring involves measuring the actual effects of your actions, and feeding information about these back into the decision-making process. Objectives and op-

erations can then be adjusted to address any adverse effects. For every enhancement or mitigation action taken, you need to define how the effectiveness of that action will be measured (i.e. what indicators to use), and establish a process for measuring the outcome of that action at specific points in time.

Once identified, appropriate indicators can be used to measure the social effects of actions. First measure the state of each indicator prior to making any changes. This initial measurement is called the **baseline**. Changes in indicators revealed by future measurement can then be compared with the baseline to reveal trends. Monitoring should **begin as early as possible** (before the start of the project), to establish baseline data from which effects can be measured.

Monitoring may reveal effects that had not been anticipated. If so, one needs to go back and repeat the effects identification, and the mitigation and enhancement stages. Once the process of assessing effects is underway, the latter three stages of the process can become a continuous, re-iterative loop.

Monitoring provides feed-back so the project can be fine-tuned in response to information about its effects. If monitoring reveals an enhancement or mitigation measure has **not** produced the expected result, the strategy should be reviewed and amended accordingly.

One of the biggest challenges to effective monitoring lies in isolating the effects of the project from those of other factors. How can one be sure, for instance, that an increase in visitor numbers to the local town results directly from the track upgrade just completed? Would the increase, or some of it, have occurred anyway? What other factors might have contributed to the change? One needs to think through these issues carefully when choosing indicators and designing appropriate monitoring.

References

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