



# STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) can be a powerful holistic and participatory approach to the evaluation of cumulative environmental impacts and provision of conservation outcomes. It has significant advantages over traditional project/site based Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

## WHAT IS SEA?

SEA refers to the assessment of potential impacts of policies, plans and programs, as a distinct process from the more widely known project level environmental impact assessment (EIA). SEA was developed as a response to the shortcomings experienced with applying project-level EIA. Its application is appropriate to higher level tiers of the decision making process (policies, plans and programs) compared to project specific assessments (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Application of EIA and SEA at each tier of assessment

SEA recognises assessments of individual projects are typically unable to sufficiently address the broader issues of cumulative impacts, regional losses of biodiversity and threatening processes. Assessing policies, plans and programs ensures environmental concerns are taken into consideration more proactively than when assessing specific development proposals. SEA also helps to ensure policies and plans can better guide project assessments around environmental outcomes. Accepted principles for SEA include being sustainability led, participatory, and transparent (Figure 2).

In an Australian context, SEA has generally been undertaken under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act), in which is referred to as 'strategic assessment'. Ecological Sustainable Development is a driving principle for the SEA

under the EPBC Act. Other forms of SEA can be, and have been, undertaken under various State based legislation across Australia, sometimes in collaboration with the Commonwealth.

In New Zealand, the Resource Management Act 1991 contains provisions for the evaluation of policies and plans, at local, regional and central government levels that meet many of the aims of SEA. Additional, ad hoc processes that can be viewed as forms of SEA have been used in New Zealand in the last 10-15 years, in water, urban and rural land use, and transport planning.

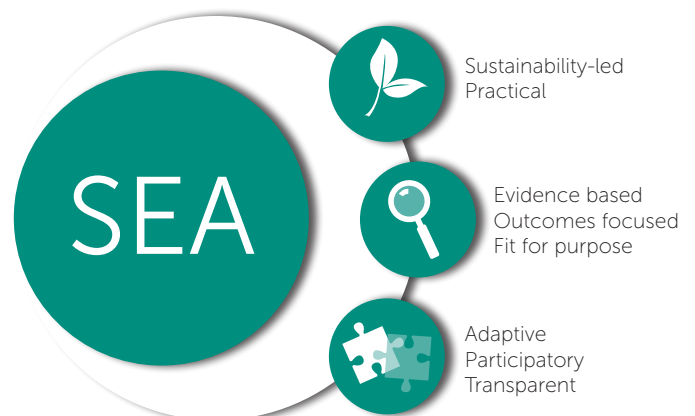


Figure 2: Principles of SEA

## ADVANTAGES OF SEA

The benefits of SEA are considerable, both in terms of its potential to achieve environmental sustainability and facilitate more streamlined regulation (see Table 1). Transparency about decision-making and clarity about where and what environmental values should be protected are products of a robust SEA process.

SEA can add value to strategic planning and decision-making processes through rendering them more transparent and accountable while ensuring environmental and social impacts are carefully considered and debated. SEA methodologies can be usefully applied when designing decision alternatives, when engaging stakeholders, and when developing mechanisms for plan/program implementation and monitoring.



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Table 1: Key benefits of SEA

BENEFIT	EXPLANATION
Sustainability focussed	<p>SEA can integrate and evaluate aspects of sustainability (environmental, social &amp; economic) in the assessment process.</p> <p>The SEA decision-making process is typically centred upon promoting sustainability.</p>
Strategic spatial scale and prioritisation	<p>The spatial scale of SEAs is often much larger than project-level assessments which is more appropriate to evaluate ecological impacts with landscape scale implications. SEA typically targets areas under development pressure, anticipating a high number of referrals under the EPBC Act.</p> <p>SEAs often utilise advanced spatial assessment and prioritisation techniques such as precinct planning and bioregional analysis.</p>
Strategic time scale	<p>The time scale for strategic assessments is larger and focusses on providing long-term sustainability for future generations.</p> <p>SEAs have multi-generational implications and therefore need to incorporate higher levels of uncertainty analysis and adaptive management.</p>
Improved cumulative impact assessment (CIA)	<p>As multiple projects or activities are incorporated into a SEA, CIA is utilised to ensure the combined impacts of these projects/activities are assessed.</p> <p>CIA is more effective when all interacting processes are assessed via one tool (i.e. SEA); compared to project level assessment</p>
Improved assessment of alternatives	<p>Assessment of alternatives is viewed as a significant weakness of project level assessment. SEA allows for a more effective assessment of alternatives which can be future-orientated and include multidimensional analysis.</p>
Collaborative process	<p>SEAs are a highly collaborative process with active participation and knowledge sharing between all relevant stakeholders throughout the assessment process.</p> <p>Active participation allows for more effective collaboration compared to other techniques often utilised in project level assessments (e.g. reporting and consultation).</p>

## WHAT VALUE DOES SEA HAVE FOR ME?

### *Are you a proponent?*

SEA provides significant time and cost savings as it may remove the requirement to refer future individual projects for assessment or at least expedite those future assessment processes. SEA provides a more holistic approach to conservation. It improves certainty regarding future development opportunities.

Since SEA occurs early in the planning process, clear requirements for the protection of environmental matters are known upfront. For businesses, this information is important for effective early project scoping processes and site selection.

### *Are you a consultant?*

SEA provides an opportunity for consultants to be involved early in the planning process where effective landscape scale decisions around both development and conservation take place. SEA also leads with conservation outcomes, providing rare opportunity to influence change in conservation approaches for protected matters.

### *Are you a regulator (Government)?*

SEA can assist in avoiding duplication by different levels of government. For example, in considering offset approaches for a geographical region under SEA, the Australian Government can work with its state and territory counterparts to secure shared conservation protection for the same environmental values.

SEA can also reduce administrative burden for strategic assessment partners and all levels of government through a substantial reduction in the number of environmental assessments required for an area or resource.

### *Are you a community member?*

SEA provides for effective public participation in impact assessment at the strategic level. Instead of considering individual projects, the community can consider environmental impacts and outcomes in a broad way and provide input on alternatives for development, where they think development should occur and what areas should be protected.

## WHERE TO GET MORE INFORMATION?

<https://www.eianz.org/about/sea-community-of-practice/strategic-environmental-assessment-sea>