

Myth and momentum: An assessment of environmental impact assessments

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Abstract

Environmental impact assessments (EIAs) are designed to document all reasonably foreseeable consequences of proposed actions or activities for environmental resources, such as ecosystems, habitats and species. Traditionally, these assessments have been undertaken directly by management agencies, often involving appropriate government researchers. However, the number of EIAs required is rising. Furthermore, cumulative impact assessments are a challenging, but increasingly important component of broader EIAs. For these and other reasons, many EIAs are now contracted out, often to the lowest bidder, who may or may not have all the relevant expertise immediately available. Other EIAs may still suffer from limited agency resources or structural conflicts of interest. In both cases, EIAs are now often rushed to completion to meet legislative deadlines or avoid delaying projects. The resulting assessments tend to be (although are not always) poorly researched documents that draw heavily upon previous EIAs. Consequently, treatment of topics quickly becomes habitual, perpetuating misconceptions and analytical flaws from previous documents that may lag substantially behind advancements in the scientific literature. Common misconceptions expressed in EIAs concerning wildlife impacts include: a focus on lethal takes of species and the underplay of non-lethal impacts or habitat degradation; a general dismissal of the possibility that non-significant (to the resource) impacts can combine to become significant; and the assumption that behavioural habituation in animals represents an end of impact. Incentive to break the cycle is lacking in this now commercially competitive business environment, where assessment contracts are increasingly awarded by those intending to undertake the activities. This also generates a potential conflict of interest, where contractors may feel obliged to effectively approve the actions to avoid losing future contracts. However, we believe investment in thorough, impartially written, scientifically-based and up-to-date EIAs is important for appropriately managing a resource and avoiding potentially expensive litigation.