more to academic scholars and researchers than to hard-pressed practitioners, but there is also a miscellaneous of applicable guidance to be mined from a number of chapters.

Notes

1. For readers who follow these matters closely, your reviewer appears to have been found guilty on both charges.

In need of polishing and editing

Angus Morrison-Saunders

Theory and Practice of Strategic Environmental Assessment: Towards a More Systematic Approach by Thomas B Fischer

This book joins a burgeoning pile of tomes devoted to the topic of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) published in recent years; so what does it contribute to the field?

My first port of call was the bibliography to see what sources had informed the book. Yes, I confess I was in part curious to see whether any of my own work on related topics had been included and was happy enough on this account. However, I did get a bit of a surprise here. Without naming names, it is interesting to see who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ with respect to this bibliography: I discovered that some books that I consider essential reading on the topic and which provide the foundation of my own teaching and training on SEA were not included. In my view, it would be better to cite sources either inclusively or in order to refute them, rather than ignore them altogether.

I then perused the Preface, the Foreword and the “About this book” section followed by the Index. The Preface places the book in the context of the European Directive on SEA and the Foreword within the ambit of the International Association for Impact Assessment; neither of these seemingly particularly related to what the book purports to be about. This is advanced in the “About this book” section as the use of the generic principles that underlie any SEA to develop and promote a more systematic approach to SEA. Four specific objectives are provided:

- to portray current conceptual ideas on SEA and to develop them further;
- to provide for an overview of the fundamental principles and rules of SEA;
- to report on international SEA in a systematic manner;
- to advance SEA theory.

The book is divided into seven chapters that address in turn SEA origins, the SEA process, alternatives and tiering, a comparative review of 11 established SEA systems from around the world, implementation of the SEA Directive in European Union member states, five spatial/land-use SEAs representing different levels of ‘strategicness’ and recommendations for the future development of SEA.

The Index provided some more surprises. Looking up some favourite topics, I quickly discovered that neither ‘alternatives’ nor ‘options’ appeared in the Index nor ‘integration’, although later on I did spot the indexed topic of ‘substantive integration’, and the entry for ‘sustainability appraisal’ appeared twice. Wondering about the quality of editing that had gone into the Index, I scrutinised it a bit more closely and found that the federal Australian Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC) were incorrectly named (that is, with the first word given as “Environmental”) and attributed to the state of Western Australia. I also could not reconcile the listing of eight countries under the index heading of “EIA based SEA”, while Western Australia received the listing of “EIA process-based SEA” and the corresponding text did not explain the difference.

At this point, knowing that my home jurisdiction of Western Australia featured in the book, it was natural that I turned to the relevant section. I have to say that I was shocked and appalled at what I read. In legal matters, I expect precision because the law means precisely what it says and it does not pay to get such things wrong. To the incorrectly named EPBC Act mentioned previously can be added the Environmental Protection Authority (named as “Agency” in the text, but later correctly named in the bibliography) and the non-existent “Environmental Protection and Assessment Act (1979, 1993)”. Worse still, the account of SEA practice in

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Western Australia is simply wrong and very little of
the claims made about it are referenced.

One 2006 journal article by two Australian au-
thors was referenced and I subsequently looked this up
(noting along the way that the volume and page numbers
were incorrectly recorded in the bibliogra-
phy of the book). The account of SEA in Western
Australia in the journal article was exactly right and
very carefully worded. Unfortunately, reasonably
large sections of text have been taken from this article
but the context has been altered. For instance, the
sentence: “Examples of strategic proposals include
land use planning strategies, drilling programs or
satellite mining developments.” in the journal article
(Marsden and Sashe, 2006) became “In Western
Australia, SEA is conducted for local land use plans
(‘planning strategies’ or policy plans), drilling pro-
grammes and satellite mining developments, pre-
pared by public planning authorities …” in this book.

I could cite many more such examples as the en-
tire section is riddled with errors. It is a shame that
the author did not either directly cite from the jour-
nal paper or return to original sources for his inform-
ation, as his interpretation of this secondary source
is misleading and inaccurate (for instance, public
planning authorities do not engage in drilling or
mining activities for one thing). Also it would have
been useful to have had a local expert proof-read this
section of text prior to publication. I now fear that
my students will get hold of this book and assume
the claims made about it are referenced.

The account of SEA in Western Australia is
missed. The interest in policy-related SEA
discussion then talks about “EIA-based SEA”
approaches to SEA; are some meant to be the same
and “non-EIA-based SEA”.

I really struggled to understand Figure 1.1. This
was in part because the content of the figure did not
tally with the description given of the European SEA
process on the preceding page; the “SEA process”
component of the figure is all about minimising nega-
tive impacts while the textual description of European
SEA (page 3) emphasises identification and choice of
alternatives, which in the figure are identified as part
of the “Plan and programme making process”. Similar
confusion continues into the text after the figure too.
Now perhaps, being a non-European, I am failing to
understand something here, but I would expect a book
that purports to be an educational asset to explain
things in a non-ambiguous manner. In this light, I
would have expected the first figure in the book to
tally with the answer to the question posed in the chap-
ter title, that is, to give some satisfactory explanation
of what SEA is.

Here is another example of confusing use of termi-
ology: it is pointed out that SEA provides a system-
atic decision-making framework for considering
“issues and alternatives” (page 2), “alternatives and
aspects” (page 6) and “alternatives and options” (page
7). I find this repetition with variation hard to recon-
cile, and it continues throughout the book. For
instance, one of the opening sentences of Chapter 2 is
almost identical to a sentence in the “About this book”
section except that in one SEA is “a systematic
decision support process …” while in the other it is “a
procedural support instrument …” (where the remain-
ing portions of the two sentences are virtually word-
for-word identical). On the one hand, the repetition is
annoying, while on the other, the differences in word-
ing invoke different interpretation and/or meaning,
which is confusing. I consider this to be sloppy writing
(and sloppy editing on behalf of the publishers).

Adequate accuracy or context is often lacking in
the writing. For example, the claim that “participa-
tion processes in public decision-making have been
strengthened by the Aarhus Convention …” (page
31) is only relevant to the European countries signa-
tory to this convention, whereas the writing implies
universality. Further disturbing is the absence of any
reference or proof to verify this claim. Another ex-
ample relates to the claim that the public may not
show a high level of interest in policy-related SEAs
relative to more project-related decisions (page 32),
which is subsequently illustrated with a single
example of public response to a Danish spatial plan
— the example does not hold because there is no
comparative indication of public response to a rele-
vant or related Danish project.

Chapter 2 deals with SEA “process, methods and
techniques”. It covers each of these adequately
enough (notwithstanding that the further explanation
of SEA process continues with the terminological
confusion established in Chapter 1). However, I felt
the absence of discussion about who it is that con-
ducts SEA to be a significant omission.
Chapter 3 deals with the identification and treatment of alternatives and puts this into the context of tiering from policy-level decisions through to plan, programme and project levels. Plenty of examples are provided to support the discussion. While I have personal doubts about the theoretical ideals of tiering (based on observations from local practice where project-level EIA inevitably drives policy change and where attempts to initiate plan-level SEAs prior to project-level EIA has been a spectacular failure for various institutional reasons), proponents of this concept will find this chapter to be useful.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide a comparative review of various international approaches to SEA from around the world and within Europe respectively; as indicated previously, I am not qualified to comment on the veracity of the material presented here beyond my home jurisdiction. Chapter 6 presents five spatial and land-use SEA case studies drawn from four European countries. I found these to be informative and interesting — I have long admired European approaches to planning relative to the largely reactive development-led approaches we seem to resort to here in Australia. This is where an understanding of cultural, historical and geographical context is important in order to understand how SEA practice can vary in practice around the world.

Chapter 7 presents a summary and conclusions of the book. It carefully restates the purpose of the book and reviews the main points made in each of the chapters. The core of this chapter is a section entitled “Advancing SEA theory: towards a more systematic approach”, which states the author’s key messages for advancing SEA practice with appropriate linkages made to previous chapters dealing with each of the points. The final two pages of the book’s main text present the author’s concluding messages and suggestions for practice and future research. Perhaps I became more acclimatised or attuned to the author’s style of writing as I progressed through the book, because I found the latter chapters to be easier to read and comprehend.

So far I have touched mostly on SEA-related content. Overall, in my view, the book is appallingly poorly edited. Previously I noted a number of errors of fact. Unfortunately I also found many minor errors such as typos (for instance, “pland” in Fig 1.1), needless repetition (for instance, virtually an identical sentence completes the final two paragraphs of Chapter 1, not to mention similar sentences that crop up several times in different chapters), mismatches between text and figures or boxes (for instance, under the heading of “Context criteria for effective SEA application” in Chapter 1, the supporting Box 1.4 is entitled “Contact evaluation criteria …”), incorrect use of words or terminology (for instance, lists of “criteria”, such as in Box 1.3 are really statements of principle, process or desirability for SEA rather than true criteria that can be used to test anything) and grammatically incorrect or simply meaningless sentences. I found the latter particularly irksome and there are numerous examples throughout the book; here are two classic examples:

- “Currently, no clear generic recommendation can therefore be given on how to integrate environmental, economic and social aspects in a specific situation.” (page 15) This sentence makes no sense; why you would even attempt or wish to give a “generic recommendation” on a “specific situation” is beyond me.
- “This section focuses on the question of how SEA is thought to be effective in leading to a better consideration of the environmental component in PPP making.” (page 17), which is soon followed by; “SEA provides decision-makers with better information.” Both sentences raise the question of “Better” than what? This criticism can be levelled at dozens of sentences throughout the book. Also, in the first sentence, who exactly is doing the “thinking” mentioned is not expounded.

My overall conclusion is that the book reads like a near-complete draft work in need of final revision, polishing and editing. This is not the author’s best writing and falls way below the normally excellent standards of an Earthscan book. Whilst the book does not work for me and my experiences of SEA in Australia, perhaps it will offer something useful to a European audience for which it appears to be more suited.

Reference