

more to academic scholars and researchers than to hard-pressed practitioners, but there is also a miscellany 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
Earthscan, London, 2007, 186 pages, £20, ISBN 1-84407-452-8

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

Angus Morrison-Saunders is Senior Lecturer in Environmental Assessment, School of Environmental Science, Murdoch University, South Street, Murdoch 6150, Australia; Email: a.morrison-saunders@murdoch.edu.au.

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

One 2006 journal article by two Australian authors was referenced and I subsequently looked this up (noting along the way that the volume and page numbers were incorrectly recorded in the bibliography 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 programmes and satellite mining developments, prepared by public planning authorities ..." in this book.

I could cite many more such examples as the entire section is riddled with errors. It is a shame that the author did not either directly cite from the journal paper or return to original sources for his information, 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 that it provides an accurate account of the situation in Western Australia, making my job as a teacher of local practice that much more difficult.

In a bizarre twist on this whole issue, the journal article cites the book as a "forthcoming" source on the topic of SEA. There is an important lesson for all impact assessment professionals here; we devalue the whole sector and the supposedly robust nature of peer-reviewed publications if we allow this incestuous and circuitous approach to writing and referencing to occur.

As might be expected at this point, I was no longer feeling very confident about the accuracy of this book. I decided not to read the sections describing SEA practice in other jurisdictions, so the rest of this review focuses on the theoretical aspects of SEA addressed in the book.

Perhaps I got off to a bad start with this book and so have a somewhat jaundiced view, but I struggled to make much sense of the opening chapter entitled "What is strategic assessment?" The short answer to this question that I derived is "confusion" apparently. For instance, early on in the chapter, distinction is made between "administration-led SEA" and "cabinet SEA". The next section entitled "The SEA process" presents the first figure for the book, which pertains to the European SEA Directive approach (Figure 1.1) and the ensuing discussion then talks about "EIA-based SEA" and "non-EIA-based SEA". I found it very difficult to reconcile these five

approaches to SEA; are some meant to be the same as others?

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 negative 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 chapter title, that is, to give some satisfactory explanation of what SEA is.

Here is another example of confusing use of terminology: it is pointed out that SEA provides a systematic 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 reconcile, 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 remaining 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 wording invite 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 "participation processes in public decision-making have been strengthened by the Aarhus Convention ..." (page 31) is only relevant to the European countries signatory to this convention, whereas the writing implies universality. Further disturbing is the absence of any reference or proof to verify this claim. Another example 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 relevant 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 conducts 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

- Marsden, S and J Ashe 2006. Strategic environmental assessment legislation in Australian states and territories. *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management*, 13(4), 205–215.