



IUCN – The World Conservation Union

Water Law Series Issue 10

Water and Environmental Impact Assessment

What is an EIA?

An Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is a preventive policy tool that is now well established world wide.

It is a process that is aimed at producing early and adequate information about the likely environmental consequences of certain plans and projects, and proposing alternatives as well as measures to mitigate harm.

A more recent tool, also relevant in the area of water resources management, is Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) which can be understood as a process to estimate the environmental impacts of legislation, policies, plans and programmes.

Why an EIA?

The impact of human activities on natural cycles and processes is becoming critical in today's world. Water infrastructure developments such as barrages, dams, dikes, harbours, pipelines, or water treatment plants can have significant effects on the environment. However, many other kinds of projects that are not directly linked with water resources can also alter water cycles, pollute waters, dry wetlands, or affect river catchments.

EIA is one of the most important preventive instruments to describe and value the potential effects of activities that may have an adverse impact on water resources.

What kind of EIA?

EIA is an essential tool for the sustainable management of water resources. The majority of EIA legislation across the world already applies to a wide range of activities that due to their placement, characteristics or size might have a significant effect on water resources.

EIA processes relating to water resources need to be adapted to the geographical characteristics of the river basin. They need to address the distinctive features of singular water resources and ecosystems, as well as reflect the cultural and social implications of water resources in itself.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of recommendations to adapt EIA to adequately address activities that could impact adversely on water resources:

- ❑ Broaden the EIA screening process, to indicate the possible impact of projects over certain water resources such as fragile water ecosystems like mangroves, coastal lagunes, or intra-territorial rivers;
- ❑ Broaden the screening process to specifically consider those projects situated close to fishing ground areas or birds breeding areas, or close to coral reefs, estuaries and river mouths;
- ❑ Ensure the incorporation of biological diversity concerns into the EIA process, and the use of EIA to evaluate projects located within protected areas;
- ❑ Ensure proper consideration of climate change when planning and implementing a water resources management system, plan or undertaking, as climate change might have an impact in the predictability of any proposed measures;
- ❑ Properly identify mitigation measures, such as finding alternative sites, incorporate safeguards into the project and provide for compensation for adverse impacts;
- ❑ Ensure wide consultation and involve civil society in the EIA process in an open and transparent manner;
- ❑ Give due consideration to the social consequences that are likely to follow from an activity (social impact assessment);
- ❑ Ensure due consideration of gender equity issues;
- ❑ Ensure due consideration of indigenous peoples and their communities (Issue 8);
- ❑ Seek a harmonised EIA system for all the basin states in shared river basins.

Where do I go for further assistance?

The IUCN Environmental Law Programme: see below for contact details.

IUCN Environmental Law Centre for the IUCN Environmental Law Programme

Contact the IUCN Environmental Law Centre at: waterlaw@elc.iucn.org

Visit the IUCN Environmental Law Programme Website at: www.iucn.org/themes/law