

Environmental Impact Statements in  
Western Australia.

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The concept of Environmental Impact Statements (E.I.S.) is relatively new in Australia. The federal legislation (Australian Government Environmental Protection (Impact of Proposals) Act, 1974) is recent. Under this act, an E.I.S. is required for any project requiring federal government funds, or involving federal constitutional power (eg. granting of export licenses).

In Western Australia, there are no provisions under the act which established the Environmental Protection Authority (Environmental Protection Act, 1971) for E.I.S.'s to be prepared or assessed, and at this stage there <sup>appears to be</sup> no plan to introduce a system of E.I.S.'s. The Conservation and Environment Department (servicing the E.P.A.) has recently prepared guidelines for Beach Sand Mining Environment Reviews, and may in the future prepare other review guidelines (for other types of proposals). ~~Some aspects of the~~ These guidelines relate to layout and content of Reviews. Some aspects of the content guidelines fulfill requirement criteria for E.I.S.'s described below.

E.I.S.'s prepared within the State of Western Australia to fulfill federal government requirements may be assessed by the W.A. Department of Conservation and Environment, but without adequate statutory standards, the assessment is likely to be arbitrary.

The system of E.I.S.'s was devised essentially with the following goals:

1. to enhance consideration of non-economic values.
2. to enhance public participation in the decision making process.

The first of these ~~goals~~ <sup>set of</sup> goals would seem to be ~~attained~~ <sup>a</sup> by most recent W.A. E.I.S.'s. Yet environmentalists are concerned that these recent Statements are no more than biological

whitewash and justification for proposals already decided on. This effectively dissipates the energies of the environmental groups. Accordingly, they desire some guidelines by which to judge E.I.S. adequacy, in the hope that this will improve the role of the E.I.S. system to one where the Statements actually contribute to the amelioration of environmental impacts.

The second goal cannot be seen to be met by present Australian legislation (or the non-existent W.A. legislation). The purpose of public participation is to enhance the probability of a socially desirable result. In W.A., access to the planning process under the E.P.A. Act is limited, and the powers are free to ignore advice. Furthermore, as Garbesi (1975) points out, effective citizen action is circumscribed effectively by the notable lack of statutory standards in environmental matters. In contrast, under the U.S. National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, the public are given six months to comment on proposals, make submissions, and instigate public enquiries before any decision is made.

The following guideline proposal seeks to provide the necessary standards for citizen appraisal of E.I.S.'s. The guidelines are drawn from Westman (1973) and Conacher (1975). Essentially there are two categories of requirements:

A. information which should be detailed in an E.I.S.

B. Requirements for the preparation and assessment of E.I.S.'s.

A. E.I.S. Content.

T. The E.I.S. should clearly outline all environmental impacts of the proposed project, including impact on alternative land uses (present & future). A quantitative assessment of the impacts should be provided, based on adequate scientific research.

2. The E.I.S. should state which adverse impacts cannot be avoided.
3. The E.I.S. should show clearly the relationship between short-term gains and long-term pay-offs.
4. The E.I.S. should report on irreversible and irremediable loss of resources.
5. The E.I.S. should detail all environmental ~~monitoring~~ safeguards to be applied, including monitoring and research into improvement of environmental standards.

#### B. Preparation and Assessment criteria.

6. The E.I.S. should be prepared by an independent body at the developer's expense. (polluter pays principle).
7. Sufficient time should be allowed in the planning of the project for gathering adequate quantitative data and for adequate environmental and ecological research.
8. The E.I.S. should be readily available (and inexpensive) for public evaluation and input before any decision is made.
9. There should be an E.I.S. quality evaluation body to judge the adequacy of the E.I.S. (similar to the U.S. Council for Environmental Quality).
10. The whole proposal should be assessed by an independent body, which would recommend:
  - a) if or not the project should proceed.
  - b) in what form the proposal should proceed.
  - c) further public safeguards necessary.

II. Where possible, cumulative effects of all regional proposals should be considered.

Whilst the E.I.S. system leaves something to be desired (Westman ~~1977~~ 1973), it has the potential to improve environmental aspects of development projects. The present lack of standards detracts from the system (Garbesi 1975), and leaves it open to manipulation. In the absence of the necessary standards, and any E.I.S. evaluation body, the guidelines proposed here may provide a yardstick for public evaluation of Environmental Impact Statements.

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