



Strategic environmental assessment in tourism planning – Extent of application and quality of documentation

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ABSTRACT

Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) has been applied throughout the world in different sectors and in various ways. This paper reports on results of a PhD research on SEA applied to tourism development planning, reflecting the situation in mid-2010. First, the extent of tourism specific SEA application world-wide is established. Then, based on a review of the quality of 10 selected SEA reports, good practice, as well as challenges, trends and opportunities for tourism specific SEA are identified. Shortcomings of SEA in tourism planning are established and implications for future research are outlined.

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1. Introduction

Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) type exercises have been applied in tourism planning since the 1990s (D'leteren, 2008). Practice became more widespread following the introduction of the European SEA Directive (2001/42/EC), not just within, but also outside the EU. Europe's tourism sector is the world's largest and most mature (UNWTO, 2009) and its relevance in terms of potential impacts on the environment has been recognized in the Directive. It states that all tourism plans and programs prepared by national, regional or local authorities, which are likely to have significant environmental effects, and which are required by legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions, are to be subjected to SEA.

Many developing countries and emerging economies are encouraging tourism for development. This is often supported by investment programs from bilateral and multilateral agencies, as tourism related developments are frequently associated with poverty reduction strategies and generation of unskilled jobs. Related SEA practice in developing countries is progressively growing and is now considered critically important, as tourism, along with other primary economic activities, such as agriculture and mining often cause considerable environmental degradation (Retief et al., 2008).

While SEA in tourism planning is thus increasing globally, there is currently no real debate on tourism specific SEA procedures and methodologies. In this context, although the professional literature has reported on a number of tourism related SEA case studies (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005; D'leteren, 2008), to date no major empirical research has been conducted. This is addressed by this paper which aims at providing a general overview of the extent and quality of SEA application in tourism planning. Good practice is identified, along with challenges, trends and opportunities for tourism related SEA, based on a review of selected SEA reports.

Evaluating SEA practice is a challenging task, especially when dealing with different planning and institutional contexts, where arrangements, formal requirements and elements of conformity can be very diverse (Fischer, 2007). Furthermore, in cases where practice occurs on an ad hoc basis, in the absence of clear requirements, evaluating practice is difficult. Although best practice and generic good quality criteria have been developed (IAIA, 2002; IEMA, 2004; Fischer and Gazzola, 2006) in order to guide and influence performance, it has also been argued that there is no such thing as a generic set of evaluation criteria suitable for reviewing all SEA applications (Noble, 2003; Thissen, 2000).

This paper aims at providing a first step towards developing a better understanding of SEA practices in the tourism sector. Subsequently, the methodology for establishing and analyzing experiences is explained. This is followed by a description of findings in terms of the extent of global practice, the quality of 10 reviewed SEA reports and main issues emerging. The paper concludes by summarizing challenges and opportunities for SEA application in tourism planning, also making suggestions for future research.

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2. Methodology and criteria for reviewing tourism related SEA reports

An exploratory search by the authors of this paper on SEA practices in the tourism sector globally turned out to be a complex task, mainly because tourism is an inter-sectoral issue. Therefore, establishing clear boundaries for planning and assessment is difficult. Tourism is often an “element” in sectoral/integrated development/spatial plans and the extent of its coverage will frequently depend upon its significance and impact on the local economy. For these reasons, and in particular in order not to duplicate research done elsewhere (see references provided in the next section), the researchers decided to focus on plans and programs specifically prepared for the development of tourism only.

The methodology underlying this paper is divided into four parts. Firstly, the extent of tourism specific SEA practice is identified. Secondly, cases for evaluation are introduced. Thirdly, SEA reports are evaluated before fourthly, conclusions are drawn.

2.1. Identifying the extent of tourism specific SEA

Bibliographical research and website searches, as well as surveys with professionals and experts at workshops and conferences between 2009 and 2010 (e.g. conferences of the International Association for Impact Assessment and the Portuguese Speaking Network for Impact Assessment) provided the basis for the identification of the extent of tourism specific SEA world-wide. Although some may question the comprehensiveness and accuracy of this search, we are confident that we are providing a realistic picture of related experiences, particularly as a number of experts were contacted for verification purposes during the time of inquiry. Generally speaking, it was found that in the tourism sector, SEA is mainly applied in three ways:

- Coverage of tourism in spatial/land use planning

Tourism is frequently planned and assessed in spatial/land-use planning at regional and local levels. In this context, tourism development is addressed along with other economic activities. SEA is being extensively applied to spatial/land use plans all over the world. In England, for instance, a large number of local and regional spatial plan SEAs have been prepared which encompass tourism related sections (see, for instance, the regional spatial strategies of the South East [Government Office for the South East, 2009] and the South West [South West Regional Assembly, 2006] in the UK). In Italy, regional spatial plans to some extent present tourism development elements, considering their relevance to the national and regional economy. Examples are the Regional Territorial Plans of Piemonte (Regione Piemonte, 2011), Friuli Venezia Giulia (Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia, 2007) and Lombardia (Regione Lombardia, 2010). The same applies to Portugal and Spain, two important tourist destinations in Europe and in the world, where tourism has a strong influence on the economy, culture and social life, as well as on spatial development. There are thousands of spatial/land use plan SEAs. Related practice has already been extensively commented on in the literature (Fischer, 2010; Therivel et al, 2009; Fischer et al, 2009; Jones et al, 2005).

- Tourism plans and programs for environmentally protected areas

Environmentally protected areas can be very attractive for tourism development. At times, tourism may actually be one of the main economic justifications for these areas' protection. However, tourism may also pose great risks. In this context, SEA can be used as a tool for identifying and evaluating development alternatives and providing evidence of environmental effects. This has been done, for example, in Canada, where SEA has been extensively applied in National Parks – within which tourism is an important element (Noble, 2003). In the US, strategic assessments have also been applied to

parks and protected areas within which tourism is taking place (Southam, 2009). However, these experiences were excluded from this analysis due to the particular circumstances related to management and planning of protected areas.

- Tourism specific regional/local development plans and programs

Because tourism accounts for some substantial economic revenue and may result in significant negative or positive environmental and social impacts, some destinations choose to adopt specific tourism plans or programs (PPs) in order to develop the sector in a more controlled/managed manner. Some of these initiatives may be related to investment strategies led by financial institutions, development agencies and national or supranational governments. In this context, SEA is important, as it can lead to more environmentally sustainable PPs.

A total of 29 tourism specific plan and program SEAs from throughout the world were identified by the authors of this paper. For 25 of these, documentation could be obtained. Related practice is thus still limited compared with other sectors, including spatial/land use planning (see above), transport planning (Fischer et al, 2002; Hilden et al, 2004) and other sectoral planning (Therivel, 2010; Marshall and Fischer, 2006; Fischer et al, 2009). It was therefore decided to focus on these plans/programs for further research.

The 25 SEAs for which documentation could be obtained are presented in Box 1. Detailed references are provided at the end of this paper. The 10 SEAs included in evaluation and review are indicated in italics. The criteria used to select these SEAs are explained in the next section. Four cases were identified in the literature, for which, however, no access to any documentation could be obtained. These included [1] the SEA of the Tofo, Barra, Tofinho and Rocha Beaches area in Mozambique (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005), [2] the SEA of El Calafate Touristic Village in Argentina (Lestingi, 2005), [3] the SEA of National Tourism Policy in Czech Republic (Dalal-Clayton and Sadler, 2005) and the [4] SEA of the Tourism Development Plan of the Island of Barú, Colombia (Jiliberto, 2010).

2.2. Selecting SEAs for further analysis

10 SEA reports were selected for further analysis (marked in italics in Box 1), representing a much diversified set of planning contexts. They were selected based on the following criteria:

- Full access to related documentation

Selection was based on full availability of SEA reports. A number of experiences were identified through second source references. However, these did not provide enough information and primary sources were unavailable. In some other cases documentation was only partly available.

- Coverage of different levels of application

There appears to be great variation, depending on whether SEA is applied at, for example, national, regional or local levels. Cases should reflect practice at different decision making levels.

- Coverage of different countries/regions

Some countries have extensive SEA practice, especially EU member states, due to the SEA Directive. In this context, the United Kingdom (England, Scotland and Wales in Box 1) and Italy appear to have conducted most tourism specific SEAs. Furthermore, there is also some extensive experience regarding SEAs triggered by financial institutions or development aid agencies such as the World Bank or Inter-American Development Bank. Coverage of as many countries as possible was deemed desirable in order to reflect practice from different planning cultures and contexts.

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