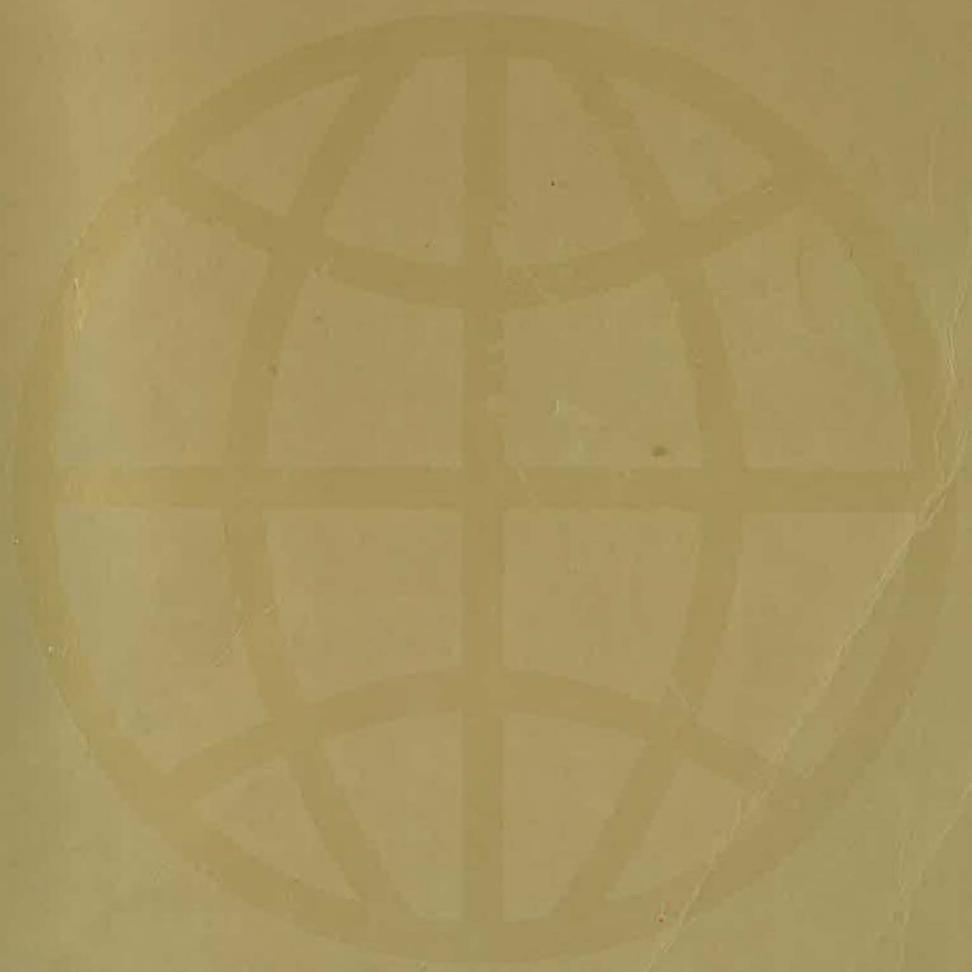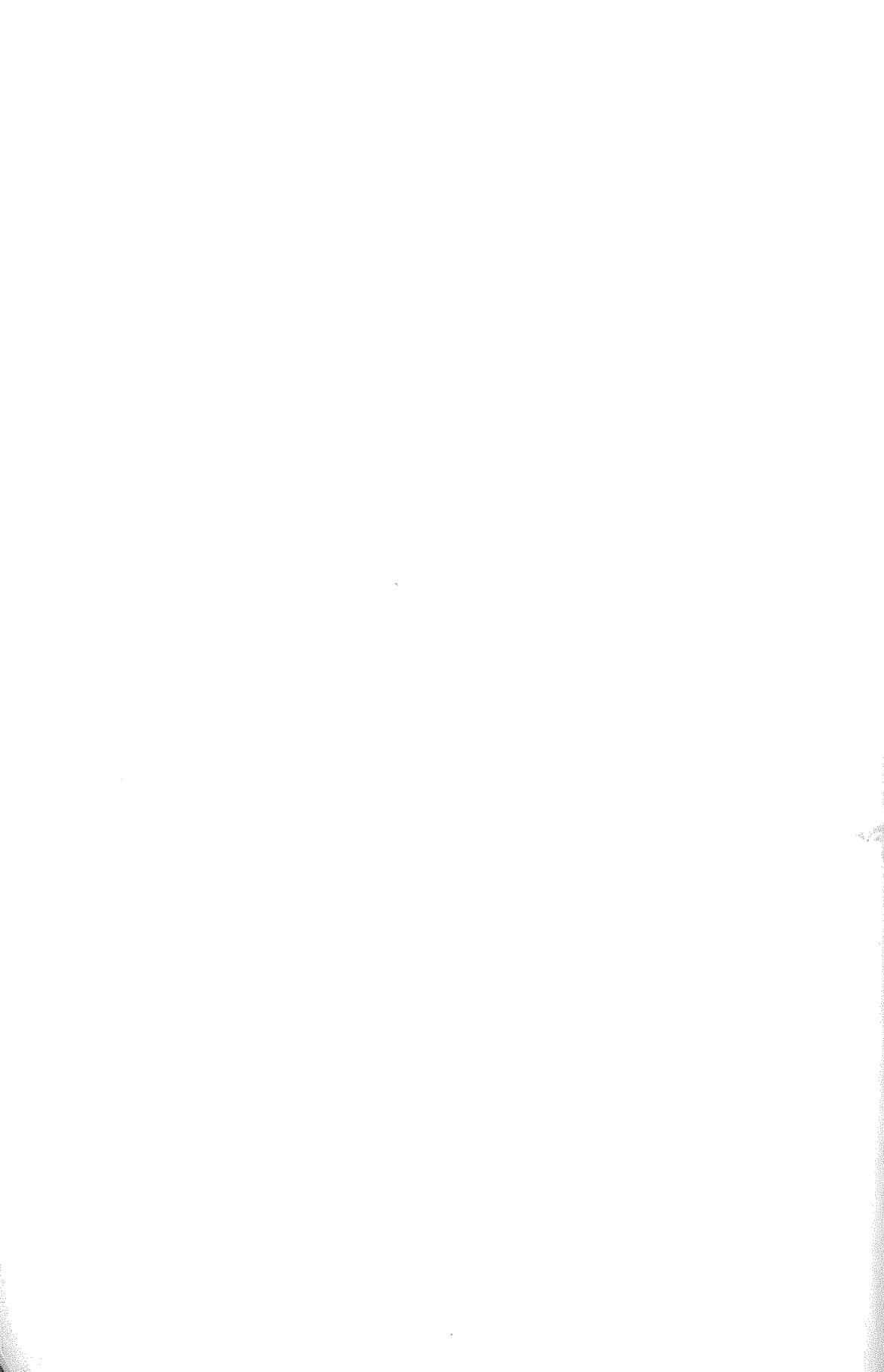# Social
Assessment
in Natural Resource
Management Institutions

Editors: Allan Dale, Nick Taylor, Marcus Lane

SOCIAL ASSESSMENT IN NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT INSTITUTIONS

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Foreword

Dawning recognition that the Earth is a finite sphere rather than the infinite plane implied by standard economics texts, coupled with (and/or spawned by) degradation and depletion of natural resources, has led to increased focus on environmental issues and resource management over the last thirty years. However the disciplines that discovered the environment in the seventies and eighties were quick to reduce it to constituent parts – land, water, vegetation, air, wildlife – and to institutionalise this disintegration. Further, management of land, or water, or any other 'resource' was conceived as a technical, biophysical challenge, for which there was a 'right' way reflected in the application of particular technologies that merely needed to be 'transferred' from experts to passive, receptive practitioners. To the extent that the environment was conceived to be a system, people were assumed to be external to it. Development of resources was implicitly assumed to be a good thing.

But understanding resource management is not just about soil science or biology or hydrology or agronomy, it is fundamentally about understanding how **people** live in, interact with, and manage natural resources. Landscapes are socially constructed. Resource management is a social process, involving values, choices and trade-offs. Environmental issues are people issues.

Interventions in resource management, whether by government or industry, through a specific development project or a generic policy reform, inevitably generate costs, benefits and other social impacts. Equally inevitably, these impacts are unevenly distributed, in space and time, across different people, groups, organisations, cultures, sectors and regions.

On the face of it, one would imagine that governments in particular, but also industries and developers, would be very interested in having a better understanding of potential social impacts associated with a particular intervention, of the distribution of winners and especially losers. By now, surely, our tools and methods for bringing social impacts into planning and decision making should be as sophisticated, as accepted and as institutionalised as those for anticipating the biological impacts of, say, known pollutants or of deforestation. Surely it is common sense to *"Stop! Look! Listen!"* consistent with the slogan from the 1994 *Better Communities* document of the then New South Wales Social Policy Directorate.

This excellent compilation *Social Assessment in Natural Resource Management Institutions* demolishes such fancies. Allan Dale, Nick Taylor and Marcus Lane have brought together and added considerable value to a series of papers from the cutting edge of social assessment in the English-speaking world, and particularly in Australasia.

As Dale, Taylor and Lane put it, this is a book by those in the field, for those in the field. It should be of great value for anyone working in the field of social assessment. It is full of practical lessons and insights for practitioners, who emerge through the pages of this volume as, on the whole, somewhat demoralised and frustrated. Progress has been slow, there have been many reversals, attempts to institutionalise social assessment have rarely been durable, and real influence often appears to have precipitated political demise.

The inherently and inevitably political context within which social assessment is applied and utilised is discussed thoughtfully and frankly in this useful book. This context makes it almost inevitable that many of the attempts to institutionalise social assessment in the form of dedicated organisations or units have been ephemeral. "Shoot the messenger" will always remain firmly in the menu of responses to social assessment, which, if done well, usually means making the social outcomes of an intervention more transparent and more tractable for

those affected. This may be wholly undesirable from the perspective of proponents of that intervention, who usually have more power than the social scientists.

While it is unsurprising that dedicated organisations have not lasted, as the editors take pains to point out, there is more to institutionalising social assessment than creating dedicated structures or writing social impact assessment into statute law. Organisations may not be durable, but a body of theoretical understanding, professional expertise and skilled practice should be capable of continuous learning and development despite the ephemeral nature of organisational structures, especially in the public domain. It is the patchiness and under-development of this wider sense of institutionalisation that is more worrying for the future of social assessment. The shortage of skilled practitioners in the field with quality standards, training and review processes means that social assessment has often been carried out by people with inappropriate skills, inadequate training, lacking access to supportive professional networks or corporate memory. So social assessment practice has too often been poor, reinforcing perceptions among non-social scientists of flakiness, lack of rigour and of being 'unscientific'. The lack (within Australia at least) of even a professional body for social assessment thinkers and practitioners is indicative of the precarious status of the field.

Yet the series of diverse cases described in this volume, from the global level to the local level, in very different institutional contexts, do contain cause for some optimism. Melanie Fisher argues that, while it may not have changed the ultimate resource allocation decision, social assessment at its best has replaced anecdote and assertion with data and representative views, fomented high quality local participation, giving a stronger voice to those most affected, identified mitigation strategies, and brought social issues to the table in ways that have forced non-social scientists to be sensitive to social impacts.

The editorial hand in this volume is light but distinct. Dale, Taylor and Lane have ensured that distinct themes emerge through diverse individual contributions. These are articulated well within a coherent conceptual framework in their introductory and concluding chapters. The influence of the two workshops which brought authors together to draw out these themes and to share insights is also clear and positive.

This book deserves a wider audience than social assessment practitioners. Much of the discussion in the book revolves around the broader challenge of bringing the social sciences to the table on an equal footing with the biophysical sciences and economics in dealing with complex, contested resource management issues. This challenge is not unique to social assessment. The nub of the challenge is that the social sciences do not lend themselves to meaningful incorporation into the rational, technocratic, 'technical decision treadmill' as Dale et al call it. It can be argued that neither do the biophysical sciences – viz biodiversity being reduced to lists of species – or even economics, saddled with primitive, homogeneous notions of human behaviour and myopic with respect to issues of scale and distribution.

Dale, Taylor and Lane conclude that the answer for social scientists is not to try to pursue technocratic approaches so as to better fit the decision support systems into which biophysical and economic data is extruded, but rather to better understand 'the power problem' in order to work smarter as change agents within their institutions. Durable institutionalising of social assessment will require changes to power relations within and between resource management institutions, and a degree of opening up of governance and decision-making agencies to power sharing. Advocates of an equal voice for the social sciences are really about developing new concepts of governance and new types of institutional design. Dale, Taylor and Lane don't suggest this is easy. But they conclude optimistically that the prevailing currents in developed countries bode well for the place of social assessment to become less marginal. Citing Friedmann, they suggest that systemic change is as likely to be stimulated

externally, through the agency of an active civil society demanding greater and better involvement in resource management decisions.

Environmental issues and natural resource management challenges will not go away. Dealing with them is among the central questions of our time. These are people issues. Any field which can assist in illuminating the social outcomes of environmental interventions, and in assisting people to be more meaningfully and constructively engaged in decisions and actions which affect them, will find a growing support base and passionate advocates, despite (or even because of) its unpopularity with development proponents.

However the range of experiences captured in this book suggest that the leaders of the nascent profession of social assessment have some work to do to establish the 'small i' institutions – the professional structures, standards, protocols, accreditation processes, training and reward systems – that are needed to consolidate experience and insights into professional reliability and credibility.

This readable and insightful book offers a very interesting window on the struggles of policy and management to come to grips with the sustainability challenge over the last twenty years. It deserves a wide audience among the social sciences and, equally importantly, among policy makers and managers within resource management agencies at all levels, in government and industry.

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Disclaimer

The views represented by all contributors to this book are their own; they are not the views of the organisations for which they are currently or have previously been employed.

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PART I: INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL ASSESSMENT IN NATURAL RESOURCE INSTITUTIONS