How can we inject some passion into the ES?
The ES really isn’t the place for passion, sadly, but the first rule of thumb is that the ES has to provide an interesting read to more than the handful of EIA process nerds. The EIA has to have been about more than applying each of the industry standard methodologies. One ES I recently reviewed lacked any methodology sections for several receptors if there wasn’t a standard one available, but went grinding regardless through pages of assessment tables, concluding that impacts were major, negative, local etc. This was on the important impacts for population and recreation.

The ES must be readable from the perspective of those who will read it; it has to be written for the readers. These will fall into a series of groupings which are broadly similar to those that have been identified in the Communications Strategy/Plan: 1: regulatory authorities, including planning authorities, 2: those directly affected such as the resident population, and 3: focus and interest groups including NGOs through to informal associations.

Location, Location, Location
Just as these people, because the ES is being read by people not computers, will navigate around the site, with and without signposts, maps and interpretation; similarly they need to be able to navigate around the ES and may need analogous aids. There is an inverse relationship, in that those most familiar with the site are likely to be the least familiar with ESs.

We know what people are going to be concerned about from the implementation of the Communications Plan; and the ES is the legal document through which we document how we have incorporated society’s requirements into our project’s outcomes.

Justification, Justification, Justification
The ES is not there to showcase our toolbox. Confidence for the readership comes with justification of decisions made. In particular, potentially unpalatable decisions require rational, logical description. This can come from scientific (including social sciences) research theory or examples, experience on other projects; it doesn’t have to be based exclusively on survey data specific to the project although data definitely plays an important role. Decisions need to be described specifically. Not “we did not choose this option because of planning concerns”, that’s too generic. “At a meeting with the LPA planners we discussed which project options could be ruled out because they would not meet [specified] policies, even with reasonable mitigation for the most likely negative impacts”.

What else could change?
In part 1 we introduced the opportunity for change presented by the Defra 25 Year Environment Plan (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan-2018). At the moment we are seeing ecosystem services added into ESs as a separate section with a separate methodology. This risks not embracing the full scope of the 25 Year plan which challenges us to reframe our approach to protecting and enhancing the environment.
The 25 Year Plan elegantly presents the logic. Can we transpose this to still fulfil the core purpose of our documents?

So to conclude

1. If the project benefitted from an integrated environmental and engineering approach leading to a solution that is inherently capable of improving the environment, then the ES needs to say this, explicitly.

2. The tools, aka, the assessment methodology, risk becoming too prominent, in the ES. We have been supplied with some good ESs where the methodological detail is explained in signposted appendices. The ES is not the outcome; an understanding of the totality of the impacts of the project on the environment is. The paradigm explained in the Defra 25 Year Plan is our guide or template.

3. The ES must consider how the evolving project has been informed and improved by gathering and analysing environmental data and information. To this end the Communications Plan is also a valuable methodological tool, not simply ‘stuff’ that goes in its own separate section.

“The aim of Environmental Impact Assessment is to protect the environment by ensuring that a local planning authority when deciding to grant planning permission... does so in full knowledge of the likely significant effects... . The aim of Environmental Impact Assessment is also to ensure that the public are given early and effective opportunity to participate in the decision making procedures.”

www.gov.uk Guidance Environmental Impact Assessment. That's the purpose and there is potentially a synergy.

1 See footnote in part 1 if this is ringing any alarm bells.
2 Although I do run the glossary terms and acronyms through the find tool, and vice versa, so my computer does a bit of the work in helping me to establish whether the ES has been written for the readership.
3 Template: something that serves as a model for others to copy.

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