Landscape and Visual Assessment (LVA) is often an aspect of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) practice. For many proposed developments, LVA typically comprises a substantial part of the final Environmental Statement (ES). A challenge lies in providing a thorough, relevant and concise assessment of anticipated effects that clearly demonstrates how judgements have been determined.

Illustrations including maps, figures, photographs and Zone of Theoretical Visibility mapping are typically produced to support LVA and can effectively interpret the baseline environment. Verified photomontages are an additional tool used to support LVA, illustrating the effect of a proposed development on the receiving environment and in particular showing the effects on views from appropriate viewpoint locations.

A verified photomontage is a visual representation of a proposed development created by combining a photograph with a computer model of the proposed development. A verified photomontage is as accurate as technically possible, is replicable and is intended to withstand scrutiny during determination of a planning application and at public inquiry. A verified photomontage does not take the place of site assessment and sound professional judgement on anticipated landscape and visual effects.

**The purpose of verified photomontages**

Verified photomontages can serve a number of purposes. They are useful to demonstrate the nature of effects generally and those described in the ES as well as minor and moderate significance.

Verified photomontages can be used to inform the layout, massing and external appearance of certain development proposals during the iterative EIA design process. Proposed planting can be included in the photomontage, illustrating the effect of screen planting on completion and after a stated period of plant growth. They can aid discussion within the developer’s design team and consultation with the local planning authority.

**Selecting appropriate photomontage viewpoints**

Photomontage viewpoint selection commonly follows field assessment work that has determined likely effects on landscape and views. The viewpoints are usually agreed between the developer and the local planning authority. Appropriate photomontage viewpoint locations provide a balanced representation of the range of likely effects, viewing experiences and viewers. Selecting only viewpoints close to the proposed development where the greatest effects are anticipated is unlikely to provide a balanced representation of visual effects. Photomontage views with screening by built form, vegetation or landform that obscures the proposed development in the view should be avoided.

Public viewpoints are generally selected as they are more readily accessible and are likely to be witnessed by a greater number of people. Public views are given greater weight than private views in planning decisions. A photomontage viewpoint from within a private property or garden could also raise criticism that one property is considered as more important than another. Selecting a public viewpoint that also represents the view from a property or properties most affected by the proposed development would be more appropriate.

**Ensuring accuracy in the production of verified photomontage**

Photographs are a representation of a view. Photomontages on which they are prepared, regardless of accuracy, share the limitations of the baseline photograph with regard to conveying the overall impression of the final development. However it is necessary to clearly demonstrate that a verified photomontage has been properly constructed in accordance with relevant industry guidance.

Best practice guidance on photomontage production, aimed at professionals involved in photomontage production, is available from the Landscape Institute (LI Advice Note 01/11) and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) (Visual Representations of Windfarms: Good Practice Guidance, 2006). SNH’s visual representation guidance is currently under review. Current industry guidance identifies the technical requirements and reasoning behind the recommended method. LI Advice Note 01/11 recommends that photomontages produced to support LVA should be “based on a replicable, transparent and structured process so that the accuracy of the presentation can be verified”.

In January 2010, the Highland Council produced its own visualisation standards for wind energy developments (although also applicable to other developments for which panoramic photomontages are prepared). These standards were produced to enable the Council to verify that photomontages submitted in support of planning applications and contained with ESs are accurate and clearly understood representations of the proposed development.

In 2011, the Highland Council commissioned the University of Stirling to undertake a focal length perception study that investigated the effect of focal length on public perceptions of scale and distance in landscape photographs. This study could influence the production of photomontages in particular for use by members of the public. The findings of the preliminary study are discussed in “Windfarm Visualisation Perspective or Perception?” (Alan Macdonald, 2012).
Discussion on the use of verified photomontage illustrations to support Landscape and Visual Assessment

Landscape and Visual Assessment (LVA) is often an aspect of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) practice. For many proposed developments, LVA typically comprises a substantial part of the final Environmental Statement (ES). A challenge lies in providing a thorough, relevant and concise assessment of anticipated effects that clearly demonstrates how judgements have been determined.

Illustrations including maps, figures, photographs and Zone of Theoretical Visibility mapping are typically produced to support LVA and can effectively interpret the baseline environment. Verified photomontages are an additional tool used to support LVA, illustrating the effect of a proposed development on the receiving environment and in particular showing the effects on views from appropriate viewpoint locations.

A verified photomontage is a visual representation of a proposed development created by combining a photograph with a computer model of the proposed development. A verified photomontage is as accurate as technically possible, is replicable and is intended to withstand scrutiny during determination of a planning application and at public inquiry. A verified photomontage does not take the place of site assessment and sound professional judgement on anticipated landscape and visual effects.

The purpose of verified photomontages

Verified photomontages can serve a number of purposes. They are useful to demonstrate the nature of effects generally and those described in the LVA. For example, photomontages can be used to illustrate what constitutes an effect described in the ES as being of minor and moderate significance.

Verified photomontages can be used to inform the layout, massing and external appearance of certain development proposals during the iterative EIA design process. Proposed planting can be included in the photomontage, illustrating the effect of screen planting on completion and after a staged period of plant growth. They can aid discussion within the developer’s design team and consultation with the local planning authority.

Selecting appropriate photomontage viewpoints

Photomontage viewpoint selection commonly follows field assessment work that has determined likely effects on landscape and views. The viewpoints are usually agreed between the developer and the local planning authority. Appropriate photomontage viewpoint locations provide a balanced representation of the range of likely effects, viewing experiences and viewers.

Selecting only viewpoints close to the proposed development where the greatest effects are anticipated is unlikely to provide a balanced representation of visual effects. Photomontage views with screening by built form, vegetation or landform that obscures the proposed development in the view should be avoided.

Public viewpoints are generally selected as they are more readily accessible and are likely to be witnessed by a greater number of people. Public views are given greater weight than private views in planning decisions. A photomontage viewpoint from within a private property or garden could also raise criticism that one property is considered as more important than another. Selecting a public viewpoint that also represents the view from a property or properties most affected by the proposed development would be more appropriate.

Ensuring accuracy in the production of verified photomontage

Photographs are a representation of a view. Photomontages on which they are prepared, regardless of accuracy, share the limitations of the baseline photograph with regard to conveying the overall impression of the final development. However it is necessary to clearly demonstrate that a verified photomontage has been properly constructed in accordance with relevant industry guidance.

Best practice guidance on photomontage production, aimed at professionals involved in photomontage production, is available from the Landscape Institute (LI Advice Note 01/11) and Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) (Visual Representations of Windfarms: Good Practice Guidance, 2006). SNH’s visual representation guidance is currently under review. Current industry guidance identifies the technical requirements and reasoning behind the recommended method. LI Advice Note 01/11 recommends that photomontages produced to support LVA should be “based on a replicable, transparent and structured process so that the accuracy of the presentation can be verified”.

In January 2010, the Highland Council produced its own visualisation standards for wind energy developments (although also applicable to other developments for which panoramic photomontages are prepared). These standards were produced to enable the Council to verify that photomontages submitted in support of planning applications and contained with ESs are accurate and clearly understood representations of the proposed development.

In 2011, the Highland Council commissioned the University of Stirling to undertake a focal length perception study that investigated the effect of focal length on public perceptions of scale and distance in landscape photographs. This study could influence the production of photomontages in particular for use by members of the public. The findings of the preliminary study are discussed in “Windfarm Visualisation Perspective or Perception?” (Alan Macdonald, 2012).

For access to more EIA articles, case studies and hundreds of non-technical summaries of Environmental Statements visit: www.iema.net/gmark