EIA...The view from site

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Let me start by way of a confession, I am not an EIA practitioner per se....

Rather, my work focusses on taking the outputs of EIA, interpreting them and implementing the requirements and mitigation they impose. What I hope to get across in this piece is my experience of how EIA actually relates to projects on the ground and how the requirements and mitigation in EIA can sometimes be baffling, confusing and occasionally inappropriate in the 'real world' setting of project implementation.

In my field, we all have our 'scare stories' where inappropriate or sometimes bizarre mitigation is specified - mine include wind turbine-blade 'Ice throw' mitigation recommended for a tropical wind farm and another recent gem which recommended swimming lessons for the local arid desert dwelling community. But it is not the frankly baffling and incorrect that I want to focus on, more I want to stress the point of refining, improving and maximising the benefit of the mitigation we propose.

Give it a local flavour
In specifying mitigation, we often reach for a 'palette' of proven measures which has worked for us before. Whilst there is nothing inherently wrong with this, these standard 'solutions' could be greatly improved through tailoring to reflect the 'local' setting.

It is sometimes difficult to appreciate the local nuances, especially if the only time we've been to site are during the early phases distant from the time when mitigation is specified - time spent truly understanding the project context can greatly improve physical mitigation by ensuring the design of features, materials used or treatment finishes reflect the local vernacular. It may also allow other additional benefits to be realised such as re-using materials available in the local area or sourcing materials from local suppliers or trades.

Mitigation should sit comfortably amongst the landscape and community in which the project resides. Think about materials, approach and how things are 'traditionally done' in the project area and how this can influence mitigation.

Joined-up thinking
Another key issue is that sometimes the mitigation we propose is not necessarily joined-up between the technical disciplines. Increasingly in delivering EIA we are getting better at thinking outside of our technical 'boxes' by considering the interdigititation and interreliance of impacts between our various specialisms. This integrated approach to assessment is a wholly welcome and natural evolution. But in my experience, this integrated thinking whilst becoming increasingly apparent in front-end assessment is maybe not at the forefront to our approach when specifying mitigation. Let me give you an example.

I have worked on a highway development which transacted an area of relatively high sensitivity in terms of biodiversity, visual impact, landscape character and notable social issues associated with a community reliant on a fading aggregates industry which has a legacy of abundant waste aggregate. The EIA included requirements for using traditional hedge boundary treatments to maintain landscape character.
There were also numerous anti-dazzle screens and screening to prevent loss of visual amenity. Another challenge facing the design was ensuring biological connectivity along the linear development as the route transects key moorland habitat. To address these various issues, the EIA recommended a range of mitigations including wooden anti-dazzle features, chain-link fencing, wooden fencing, traditional hedges, habitat corridors etc. to satisfy the gamut of requirements.

When the site team mobilised, we reviewed these various requirements and it quickly became apparent that if we replaced all these various fences and boundary treatment with traditional hedges then the following would be achieved:

1. Prevention of visual intrusion and dazzling from headlights;
2. Maintenance of the landscape character and reduced visual impact;
3. Re-use of spoil and rocks generated on site rather than using ‘virgin’ materials;
4. Provision of ecological connectivity and additional habitat along the hedgerow;
5. Reduction in maintenance requirements;
6. Happier neighbours who much preferred traditional hedges to chain-link or wooden fencing; and
7. Happier regulators and nature conservation organisations who could see the additional benefits.

The result is one form of mitigation which satisfied a number of requirements and greatly simplified the pallet of boundary treatments. But the cost...well actually it was cheaper than using wooden/chain-link fencing. The result: happy contractor; client; local residents; improved mitigation and better project!

In conclusion, I believe we are getting much better at integrating our approach to impact assessment. If we adopt the same rounded integrated approach in specifying mitigation then I think the quality, efficacy and value of EIA will be substantially improved. One last thought, if you are looking to forge a career in EIA, get your hands ‘dirty’. The benefit and greater understanding you will accrue from experiencing project implementation cannot be over-stated!

Alan Phillips, Xodus Group, March 2015.