

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS

The IEMA Handbook

Edited by
John Brady

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Contents

<i>List of Figures, Tables and Boxes</i>	<i>xii</i>
<i>About the Contributors</i>	<i>xvi</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	<i>xxi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xxiv</i>
<i>List of Acronyms and Abbreviations</i>	<i>xxv</i>
Introduction	xxxi
Section 1 Environment and Sustainable Development	
1.1 The Earth's Natural Systems	3
The origins of the Earth	3
The living system of planet Earth	4
Natural laws and living organisms	4
Nature's cycles	6
Biological diversity	7
Human ecology	8
Our industrial legacy	9
Rediscovering our nature	10
Further reading	11
1.2 The State of the Global Environment	12
All things are linked	12
Material behaviour within nature's cycles	12
Pollutants within the Earth system	14
Physical degradation of natural systems	16
The human population	16
Overburdening an interconnected world	17
Trends in water	18
Biodiversity struggling on	20
Shrinking earth, vanishing forests, barren oceans and empty food baskets	21
Caught in the cross-winds	22
The human cost	24
Money makes the world go around	25
Our common destiny	26
References and further reading	27

1.3 Sustainability and Sustainable Development	28
A track record of progress	28
The funnel effect	33
Sustainability principles	34
Systems thinking	36
Backcasting	39
The social dimension of sustainable development	40
Models of sustainability and sustainable development	41
Transformation	45
Making sense of sustainable development	46
References and further reading	46

Section 2 Policy and Legislation

2.1 Overview of the Law and International Legislation	51
Introduction	51
What is law?	51
Types of law	52
How laws arise	52
Environmental principles	54
When laws are breached	55
Aspects of international law	57
International trade and the environment	59
References and further reading	60
2.2 European Union Environmental Policy and Legislation	62
Introduction	62
Europe's environment	62
Making policy	64
The Sixth EAP, 'Our Future, Our Choice', 2001–2010	66
Implementation and enforcement of legislation	67
Climate change	69
Strategy for chemicals	71
The challenge of enlargement	72
The future of EU environmental policy	73
References and further reading	73
2.3 The UK Legislative Context	75
Introduction	75
The planning system	77
IPP and IPPC	79
The control of air pollution	86
Water pollution and water quality	87
Contaminated land regime	91
References and further reading	93

Section 3 Managing Environmental Performance

3.1 The Response of Organizations	97
Environmental issues from the perspective of the organization	97
The impacts of environmental issues on organizations	98
Understanding the pressures on organizations	101
Taking action	104
Summary	105
3.2 Environmental Management Systems	106
Introduction	106
EMS background	106
ISO 14001 – EMS specification	107
EMS certification and accreditation	113
Eco-management and Audit Scheme (EMAS)	113
The ISO 14000 environmental management series	115
References	117
3.3 Towards Sustainable Procurement	118
Introduction	118
Developing a sustainable procurement strategy	119
Towards sustainable procurement – risk assessment	121
Selection of the most sustainable suppliers	127
Developing suppliers and improving their approach to sustainability	136
Conclusions	136
References and further reading	137
3.4 Environmental Product Development	138
Introduction	138
Environmental product development	139
Understanding the environmental impacts of products	141
Improving the environmental performance of products	143
Communicating the environmental performance of products	147
References	151
3.5 Waste Management and Packaging	152
Environmental impacts caused by waste	152
Strategy and policy background	152
Classification of wastes	153
Managing waste at industrial sites – the duty of care	154
Managing packaging waste obligations	158
Future trends: the EU framework	159
References and further reading	162
3.6 Contaminated Land	163
What is meant by contaminated land?	163
Why it can be a problem	164
The main process of managing land contamination	165
Dealing with other issues	167

Skills and professional development	168
A checklist for environmental management of land contamination	168
References	169

3.7 Engaging with People in your Organization	171
Introduction	171
Preparing the ground	172
Change management	173
The training cycle: analysis and design	174
The training cycle: delivery	178
The training cycle: evaluation	180
Summary	183
References and further reading	184

Section 4 Evaluation Tools

4.1 Environmental Impact Assessment	187
Introduction	187
Background to EIA	189
The EIA process	192
What is involved in an EIA?	193
Links to other environmental management tools	196
Conclusions	198
References	199

4.2 Strategic Environmental Assessment	200
What is SEA?	200
Policies, plans and programmes	201
Applications of SEA	202
The SEA Directive	206
References and further reading	211

4.3 Environmental Risk Management	212
Risk, its assessment and management	212
The regulatory context	214
The application of risk assessment in regulation	217
Tools and techniques for practitioners	221
Evaluating risk assessments	224
Future trends	225
References and further reading	226

4.4 Life Cycle Assessment	227
Introduction	227
LCA methodology	229
Applications of LCA	234
References and further reading	236

Section 5 Evaluating Environmental Performance

5.1 Emissions and Contamination Standards	241
Emissions to atmosphere	241
Emissions to atmosphere – administrative issues	245
Ambient air quality	246
Emissions to land	248
Discharges to water	251
References	256
5.2 Measurement and Monitoring	259
Introduction	259
Monitoring strategy and programmes	261
Monitoring of air	263
Monitoring of water	267
Monitoring of land	269
Monitoring of nuisance – noise	270
Monitoring of nuisance – odour	272
Monitoring of nuisance – deposited dust	273
Quality assurance and control	274
References	275
5.3 Auditing in Environmental Management	277
Introduction	277
Scope and objectives of auditing	279
Standards for environmental auditing	282
Management systems auditing	283
Auditor qualifications	290
Links with other business systems	292
Conclusions	293
References and further reading	294

Section 6 Communicating with Stakeholders

6.1 Indicators	297
Introduction	297
Indicators as an internal management tool	298
The first classification: ECIs, OPIs and MPIs	299
The second classification: presentation of indicators	300
Indicators from the perspective of an external stakeholder	301
Indicators – market analysis and future trends	304
References	306
6.2 Reporting and Accounting	307
Introduction	307
Financial statements, financial auditing and environmental issues	307
What accounting can do for environmental management	309
Environmental reporting	310

Social reporting, the GRI and towards the triple bottom line	313
Accounting and reporting for sustainability and sustainable development	315
Conclusions	316
References and further reading	316
6.3 Engaging with Stakeholders	318
Introduction	318
Who are the stakeholders?	319
The objectives of stakeholder dialogue	320
Techniques for stakeholder engagement and participation in environmental decision making	323
Stakeholder engagement and participation: case studies	325
Taking stock and future directions	331
References and further reading	333

Section 7 Key Environmental Themes

7.1 Pollution Prevention and Control	337
Introduction	337
Guiding principles	338
The integrated approach	339
Regulation	341
Complementary approaches	343
Environmental outcomes	345
Enforcement	346
Achievement	347
Challenges to industry	348
Further reading	348
7.2 Biodiversity and Conservation	349
What is biodiversity?	349
Why does conserving biodiversity matter?	349
International legislation and policy	351
European Union policy and legislation	352
UK policy and legislation	353
Organizations' approaches to biodiversity conservation	358
Biodiversity and land use planning	359
Delivering biodiversity through community strategies	361
Biodiversity and business	361
Conclusions	362
References and further reading	362
7.3 Climate Change and Energy	364
The science of climate change	364
The basics of carbon management	365
The policy framework	367
Emissions trading and renewable energy	370
References and further reading	374

7.4 Transport	375
Environmental impacts of transport	375
New technologies and fuels for the future	376
Improving the environmental performance of transport	377
The policy framework	379
Managing travel	381
References	382

7.5 Food and Agriculture	384
Introduction	384
Policy background	384
Implementing good environmental practice in farming	386
Food production, environmental performance and the supply chain	392
Summary	394
References and further reading	395

Section 8 Environmental Futures

8.1 The Sustainability Challenge	399
The sustainability transition	399
Economic and technological conditions for sustainability	400
Regulating for sustainability	401
Democratizing sustainability	403
Planetary futures	404
References	405

8.2 Integrated Thinking and Governance	406
Introduction	406
The context	406
The trend towards integration	407
Searching for the benefits of integration	409
The environment as the entry point	410
The challenge of governance	412
Concluding thoughts	413
References and further reading	414

8.3 The future of the Environmental Profession	415
Introduction	415
Working at Level 1: task focus	416
Level 2: first line management	416
Level 3: department and system management	417
Level 4: general management of a division or function	417
Making level sense	418
Level 5: the real challenge and opportunity	419
Seeing the whole at Level 6	420
The future	421
References	423

<i>Index</i>	425
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List of Figures, Tables and Boxes

Figures

1.3.1	The Natural Step funnel, illustrating the squeeze arising from diminishing resources and increasing population	34
1.3.2	Linear resource use	38
1.3.3	Closing the loop on material flows	39
1.3.4	The three circles model of sustainability	42
1.3.5	The Russian doll model of sustainability	43
3.2.1	The Denning Cycle	107
3.2.2	The continual improvement process	108
3.2.3	The EMAS logos	115
3.3.1	The key elements of sustainable procurement	118
3.3.2	Sustainable procurement strategy model	119
3.4.1	The product life cycle from an environmental perspective	139
3.4.2	Integrating environmental aspects into the product design and development process	140
3.4.3	The material–energy–toxicity matrix	142
3.4.4	The life cycle design strategies wheel	145
3.4.5	Five examples of eco-labels	148
3.4.6	Single issue environmental labels	150
3.7.1	The training cycle	175
4.1.1	The EIA process	192
4.1.2	A framework of environmental management tools for new projects	196
4.2.1	The hierarchy of decision making	202
4.3.1	The concept of risk management	213
4.3.2	Framework for environmental risk assessment and management	215
4.3.3	The source–pathway–receptor conceptual model	223
4.3.4	Event tree for the release of flammable liquid from a process facility	223
4.4.1	The life cycle approach	227
4.4.2	The systems approach in LCA	228
4.4.3	The phases of life cycle assessment	229
4.4.4	Flow diagram for an LCA of apples	231
5.3.1	Management systems auditing	284
6.3.1	Levels of stakeholder participation	322

6.3.2	Agenda 21 in Vale Royal	332
7.2.1	Managing biodiversity conservation	354
7.5.1	The IFM wheel	393

Tables

2.2.1	The treaties of the EU	63
2.2.2	Landmarks in EU environmental policy	64
2.2.3	Naming and shaming – the environmental scoreboard	68
2.2.4	Packages of measures to meet the EU's Kyoto commitments (2002–2003)	69
3.2.1	The ISO 14000 series of standards	116
3.3.1	Issues at each stage of the life cycle for adhesives	122
3.3.2	Key aspects for each stage in the life cycle for adhesives	124
3.3.3	Procurement actions linked to life cycle stages	126
3.3.4	Control measures for adhesives	126
3.3.5	General actions to consider	128
3.3.6	An example of a questionnaire	129
3.3.7	Sustainability scoring matrix	133
3.4.1	Eco-indicators for the production of plastic granulate	143
3.4.2	Example of design for disassembly and disposal guidelines	146
3.4.3	Example of a prioritization tool for environmental improvement options	147
3.4.4	ISO standards in the field of environmental labelling	148
3.5.1	The waste hierarchy	153
3.5.2	Advice on waste minimization	157
3.7.1	The benefits of training	172
3.7.2	Preparing for a training intervention	172
3.7.3	Strategic, functional and individual training	175
3.7.4	Questions on strategic training needs	176
3.7.5	Linking training to environmental objectives and targets	178
3.7.6	Comparison of training interventions	179
4.2.1	The limitations of project EIA	201
4.2.2	Problems in integrating SEA with policy making	209
4.4.1	Categories considered during the impact assessment phase	232
5.1.1	Interim emissions – ferrous foundry sector	243
5.1.2	Waste Incineration Directive Annex V: Air Emission Limit Values	244
5.1.3	Air quality objectives (statutory and non-statutory)	247
5.1.4	Critical receptors for three land uses	250
5.1.5	Substances with HCVs and SGVs	250
5.1.6	Environmental implications of the discharge of pollutants	252
5.1.7	Extract from the Surface Waters (River Ecosystem) (Classification) Regulations 1994	254
5.1.8	Examples of UK and EU legislation relating to inland water quality	256
5.2.1	Other terms and concepts	259
5.2.2	Common analytical principles used in environmental monitoring	260
5.2.3	Issues for a monitoring strategy	262

5.2.4	Categories of emissions to atmosphere	263
5.2.5	Popular techniques for source monitoring of controlled point releases to air	264
5.2.6	Common ambient particulate monitoring techniques	266
5.2.7	Common automatic techniques for monitoring ambient gaseous air pollutants	266
5.2.8	Common manual sampling techniques for ambient gaseous air pollutants	266
5.2.9	Selected water quality analyses	268
5.2.10	Selected contaminated soil analyses	270
5.2.11	Different characteristics of noise and their measurement	271
5.2.12	Odour monitoring techniques	272
5.2.13	Deposited dust monitoring techniques	273
5.3.1	Guidance on environmental aspects	286
5.3.2	Guidance on objectives and targets	286
5.3.3	Auditing for environmental improvement	288
5.3.4	Auditing for waste	289
5.3.5	Setting auditor qualification criteria	292
6.3.1	Techniques for communicating with the public	324
6.3.2	Strategies for stakeholder engagement in radioactive waste management	325
7.3.1	Greenhouse gases covered by the Kyoto Protocol	365
7.3.2	EU-ETS sectors	372
7.5.1	MAFF pilot indicators (2000)	391

Boxes

1.3.1	The five capital types comprising the Five Capitals model	44
1.3.2	The four system conditions of The Natural Step Framework	45
2.1.1	Development of international legislation: protecting the ozone layer	53
2.1.2	The evolution of EIA legislation	53
2.1.3	Recent sentences for environmental crimes in the UK	56
2.1.4	Key international environmental legislation	58
3.6.1	Professional bodies supporting the SiLC registration scheme	168
3.7.1	Mountstevens	176
3.7.2	Imperial Home Décor Group	177
3.7.3	Performance measurement	181
3.7.4	Evaluation of training outcomes	181
3.7.5	Measuring training effectiveness	182
3.7.6	RHP Bearings	183
4.1.1	EIA for Billund Airport	188
4.2.1	Dutch ten year programme on waste management	204
4.2.2	Sustainability appraisal of Cambridgeshire County Council and Peterborough City Council structure plan	205
4.2.3	SEA of bills and other government proposals in Denmark	205
4.2.4	Strategic assessment and planning in the water sector	206
4.3.1	Deciding on a risk assessment	217
4.3.2	Qualitative risk assessment – tips for getting started	221

6.3.1	Objectives of stakeholder engagement	321
6.3.2	Rules of engagement	321
7.2.1	Biodiversity matters because ...	350
7.2.2	The key goals of the CBD	351
7.2.3	Other relevant international obligations and initiatives	352
7.2.4	Biodiversity: the UK Action Plan	353
7.2.5	The role of lead partner	355
7.2.6	The booming bitterns	356
7.2.7	Functions of LBAPs	356
7.2.8	Farming for partridges and sparrows: a Scottish Borders LBAP project	357
7.2.9	Section 74 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000	358
7.2.10	Biodiversity and government decision making	359
7.2.11	The RTPPI's five point approach	360
7.2.12	Two local authority case studies	360
7.2.13	Natural Communities	361
7.2.14	Case study: Needingworth wetland project	361
7.3.1	Summary of the UK Climate Change Programme	369
7.5.1	Agri-environment schemes under the England Rural Development Programme (ERDP)	388
7.5.2	EU environmental legislation of relevance to agriculture	389

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Foreword

I can recall two personal milestones in my career as a water engineer. Together they signalled the transition from apprentice to fully fledged professional. The first occurred in 1976, when I was 30. With my lunch packed and my family's best wishes, I caught a train to Edinburgh to attend the professional interview for membership of the Institution of Civil Engineers. I was seeking that MICE qualification that would permit me to become a chartered engineer (CEng). This was an important moment. I couldn't progress as an engineer without the qualification and the implied approbation of my peers. At the time, not being MICE, CEng would have left my career blighted, or at least that is how it felt at the time.

The journey to Edinburgh was spent rehearsing all the possible questions that I might be asked. Had I missed some fundamental learning point? Was I worthy of chartered status? Would I be accepted into the club as a bona fide engineer, or would there be – forever – a question mark over my professional competence? It was a nervous time – a moment of truth.

About a month after my interview I received the letter telling me that I had passed the test. This was a special moment and the interview and the letter opening remain vivid memories to this day. The tens of thousands of people who have experienced the achievement of a professional qualification do not forget these moments. In one sense they are the closing pages of a book called 'formal education'. You remind yourself that you have been accepted into an association that has made an enormous contribution to improving the wellbeing of people all over the world. It is easy for these emotions and this pleasure to be discounted to zero over the years; but in that moment, the sense of achievement is quite profound.

My second milestone occurred shortly afterwards. It was a less tangible experience but real nevertheless. I remember being called into a meeting at Northumbrian Water to answer questions on proposals being formulated at the time for the clean up of the River Tees estuary. The technical details are not now important, but my ability to answer all the searching questions to the satisfaction of the external scrutineers was personally significant. For the first time I felt in total command of the subject and confident that I could respond meaningfully and intelligently to any enquiry. And 'I don't know but I'll find out' became a response that I could dare to give. Whereas MICE, CEng was my external rite of passage, the River Tees clean up meeting was a personal validation of my competence. At last I had the personal conviction that I was up to the job and felt I had become a true professional. The sense of achievement of CEng felt earlier was supplemented with a new confidence – a quiet and deeply reassuring moment.

This then is the baggage I carry when the conversation turns to what it means to be an environmental professional, as it has done on many occasions during the intervening years of the IEMA's development.

In the early 1990s I became involved in the creation of the Environmental Auditors Registration Association (EARA), a sister organization to the Institute of Environmental Assessment (IEA). Within five years about 2000 members had taken the various EARA examinations and become associate, full or principal auditors, and the IEA had become one of the centres of technical competence in the new field of environmental impact assessment. At the time of the merger of IEA/EARA and the Institute of Environmental Management in the late 1990s, the combined individual membership had increased to 4000 – today it stands at over 8000. The institute's growth over the last ten years is a reflection of the increasing importance of environmental issues and, more generally, sustainable development in our society. The range of interests of our members has steadily broadened as environmental professionals have found themselves playing an increasingly important role in the affairs of public and private sector organizations in the UK and around the world. We are witnessing the emergence of an environmental profession.

In the 1980s and as a result of the European EIA Directive we became interested in defining good practice for environmental impact assessment. Because of this, most of the early environmental professionals worked for environmental consultancies and were engaged in advising industry and government on how this new legislation should be implemented. In the 1980s, the notion of an environmental practitioner certainly didn't exist inside my employer's organization, Northumbrian Water – although ecology and landscape architecture were valued skills and much of the water industry's work was concerned with improving the quality of inland, coastal and estuarine waters. At about the same time, auditing and environmental management were beginning to make their presence felt on the corporate landscape.

Twenty years ago, environmental skills were about interpreting legislation and monitoring compliance with emission standards. Today, the environment and sustainable development are diverse areas of study, as this handbook testifies. The environmental field embraces management processes such as ISO 14001 and the European Eco-management and Audit Scheme (EMAS). There are many more standards to monitor against and comply with. Technology has developed in step with these new demands. Market instruments are being used, for example in connection with climate change agreements and the UK packaging regulations. Social responsibility initiatives are seeking to extend corporate and public sector responsibilities beyond environmental considerations, and conceptual models of sustainable development have been developed that allow us to begin to understand how biological and man made systems interact in the round.

The transformation has been astounding. Twenty years ago, the environment as a corporate responsibility was virtually non-existent, whereas today most organizations employing more than 200 people cannot manage without an environmental practitioner. And the change in skills requirements has also been quite remarkable. Twenty years ago all that was probably required was the close inspection of one or two acts of parliament and some technical adjustments to industrial processes. Today, the territory of environmental practice is very substantial, as this handbook illustrates.

The handbook contains core primer material for those who wish to make a career in the environmental field. The environmental brief is now diverse because governments