



5. PROJECT EVALUATION

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5.1 EVALUATION

Evaluation involves the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristic and outcomes of an activity or action, in order to determine its worth or merit (Dart et al, 1998). It is a major part of learning, and can provide a wealth of useful information on the outcomes of a project or action, and the dynamics of those who undertook the work.

Through the identification of the highlights and lowlights of the project, evaluation draws conclusions which can inform future decision making, and assist to define future projects and policies (Patton, 1997).

Evaluation of coastal management projects and actions are undertaken for a number of reasons:

- to **contribute information**, for example for the review of a coastal management strategy
- to be **accountable** to those who are funding the project
- as a **debrief** to the group on the completion of a project
- to **reflect** on how you're developing as a group or organisation, and whether you need to improve the way things are being done
- to **review and adjust** the management methods and techniques used in an area
- to **develop the skills and understanding** of people involved in a project by enabling them to reflect on, and learn from, their experiences
- to provide information for planning **future projects**
- to determine the **worth** of a coastal management project
- to **justify and promote** a management action to the wider community
- to **create a historical record** of management success over time
- to **review management methods and techniques**, and how effective they were
- to see if the work is **contributing to the management objectives** for an area
- to determine whether you have **met project objectives**.

It is important to be aware of the reasons for undertaking an evaluation before commencing, as this will define how the evaluation process should be designed, and what outcomes are expected as a result.

5.2 TIMING

Evaluation can take place at any time in a project. However, the most appropriate timing will be governed by the nature of the project, and the reason for carrying out the evaluation. It will be most effective when it is built in as a fundamental part of your overall project, and should be considered while the project is being designed.

You may decide that you will:

- carry out an initial baseline exercise against which to compare progress at the end of the project
- refine the project on an ongoing basis; therefore, evaluation will be part of your regular project activities

OR

- evaluate the project at agreed milestones, for example on a tri-monthly basis.

Apart from required reporting on the project, the timing and intensity of a project's evaluation is up to project participants. Many coastal management actions will benefit from being evaluated over a longer period of time, such as one to five years after the project has been completed. This can allow for the impacts of management action on aspects such as dune stability and vegetation health to be evident.

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5.3 UNDERTAKING EVALUATION

There is no one way to carry out an evaluation, with strengths and weaknesses apparent in most approaches.

A suitable approach should be developed in consultation with stakeholders such as the community, local government, relevant coastal management groups, State government or the funding body. It is important to ensure all relevant parties have an understanding of the evaluation process, and its anticipated outcomes.

Regardless of the method or approach, steps involved with any evaluation should include the following:

1. Design and plan the evaluation

- Clarify the specific purpose or intended outcomes of the evaluation. Why are you doing it? Will the evaluation be in the form of a report or a series of stories?
- Determine the questions you want to answer.
- Identify stakeholders, such as the community, local government, coastal management groups, State government or funding body, and their requirements. They may provide you with important guidance, which could make the evaluation more relevant.
- Identify possible sources of data.
- Identify potential methods, approaches and techniques.
- Agree on the evaluation purpose and procedures including timeframes and indicators.
- Prepare any materials required, such as questionnaires.

2. Gather information

- This may be an ongoing requirement or staged at key points during the project.

3. Analyse the information

- This may involve preparing a report. Check that your conclusions respond to the outcomes which the evaluation was originally seeking.

4. Use the conclusions

- Once you have evaluated the worth or merit of your project tell others about what you have learned and achieved so they too can benefit from your experience. This can empower others to undertake similar projects and make their journey easier and more enjoyable.

5.4 EVALUATION METHODS

Once you have worked out the questions you would like the evaluation to answer, you need to consider what methods to use to collect relevant information or data. The table below provides a list of some available methods. Advice on the limitations of each method is included as well as some additional references. It is intended to inspire some ideas towards how to evaluate a project. You should seek further advice and read additional references before undertaking your project evaluation.

5.4.1 Asking people

Structured interviews

Structured interviews require that all interviewees be asked the same questions, in the same order. Structured interviews can be conducted in person, and are also often used in surveys and opinion polls.

Interview questions must be selected carefully as there is no room to change the questions once the process has commenced. The way questions are constructed can also introduce bias into responses, and expert advice should be sought if you wish to undertake a conclusive interview.



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Questions are of two basic types: closed and open. Closed questions limit the respondent to a yes/no answer, or to indicating a rating or ranking on a scale presented to them. Open questions, on the other hand, invite the respondent to provide an opinion. Questionnaires may contain both types of question.

Open question example: *Through your involvement with the group and project how has your understanding of coastal plants increased?*

Closed question example: *Through your involvement with the group and project has your understanding of coastal plants increased:*

A: *significantly*

B: *slightly*

C: *not at all?*

Useful further reading on structured interviews can be found in Foddy (1996) *Constructing Questions*.

Semi-structured interviews – In person

Semi-structured interviews are informally guided. Some questions are predetermined and new questions are developed from the discussion. Questions are mainly open, providing an opportunity for the respondent to provide an opinion.

Semi-structured interviews are used to understand an interviewee's experiences and impressions.

Open question example: *How effective do you believe the group has been in addressing the original objectives of the project?*

Patton (1990) *Qualitative methods in Evaluation and Research* provides further reading on semi-structured interviews.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires can be conducted in person, by telephone, or by mail. They are used to quickly obtain information from a wide variety of people.

Questionnaires are typically inexpensive, can be completed anonymously, and are easy to compare and analyse. It is possible to involve many people, although it may only appeal to a certain section of the community, and responses from certain sections of the community may be limited.

Useful further reading can be found in De Vaus, D. (1995) *Surveys in social research*.

Evaluation stories

Evaluation stories are based on collecting and reviewing stories of significant change associated with the activity or action being evaluated. Stories are collected from those most directly involved in the project.

Example question before the project: *What is the proposed project area like at the moment? How could the project area be improved?*

Example question after the project: *What was the project area like before the project was undertaken? How do you believe it has changed?*

Photographic history

A photographic record of the site can be used to evoke memories of what a place used to be like and what it is like today, and prompt comments and discussion useful for evaluation. Recording may be in the form of an evaluation story or benefit an interview situation.



5.4.2 Physical methods

Photographic records

Photographic records capture the appearance of a coastal site, and allow comparisons of before and after management actions and are useful for on-ground projects. The use of photographic records is useful as a method to monitor a site over time, and can be used as an evaluation tool combined with other methods.

An historical record of the area's changes from before the project through to project completion are visible.

In building photographic records, you should:

- Choose a point at the project site where photos can be taken to best represent the project, and take photos over time from the same point. Mark this spot to ensure repeatability.
- Photos should be taken at the same time of day, in the same season, at the same place with the same view, and with the same camera settings and film type, in order to support comparisons. This should ensure that the only change noticeable in a succession of photos is on-ground change.
- Take photos with distinguishable features included (large trees, buildings, car parks) to help compare photos.

Aerial photographs

Taken on a frequent (annual or bi-annual) basis, aerial photographs can be used in conjunction with other evaluation methods to record change at a site. An example of the useful application of aerial photography is to provide information on how dune damage has occurred and may differentiate between natural dune movement and physical damage.

Aerial photographs should also be considered as an important part of initial project planning.

Direct measurements

Direct measurement of an aspect of the site is considered objective and less prone to bias as it physically exists (or doesn't exist). Direct measurements can be combined with other evaluation information.

Examples of direct measurements are:

- plant survival rates
- increased number of local volunteers working in the area
- a reduced incidence of vandalism
- reduced presence of weeds
- evidence of trespassing in fenced areas
- reduction in the level of sand blow
- degree of community support of changes to management direction
- degree of implementation of management recommendations
- land manager support and involvement with project

Participant observation

Data is collected by listening, watching, and documenting what is seen and heard. Through asking questions, and by noting comments, behaviours and reactions, useful information is provided to the evaluation process. The participant observation method gathers accurate information about how a group and project operates in the field.



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