



IAIA 26: QUEBEC CITY PRESENTATION PREVIEW

# The Truth Tangle: Untying Misinformation in Impact Assessment

SESSION ID 526

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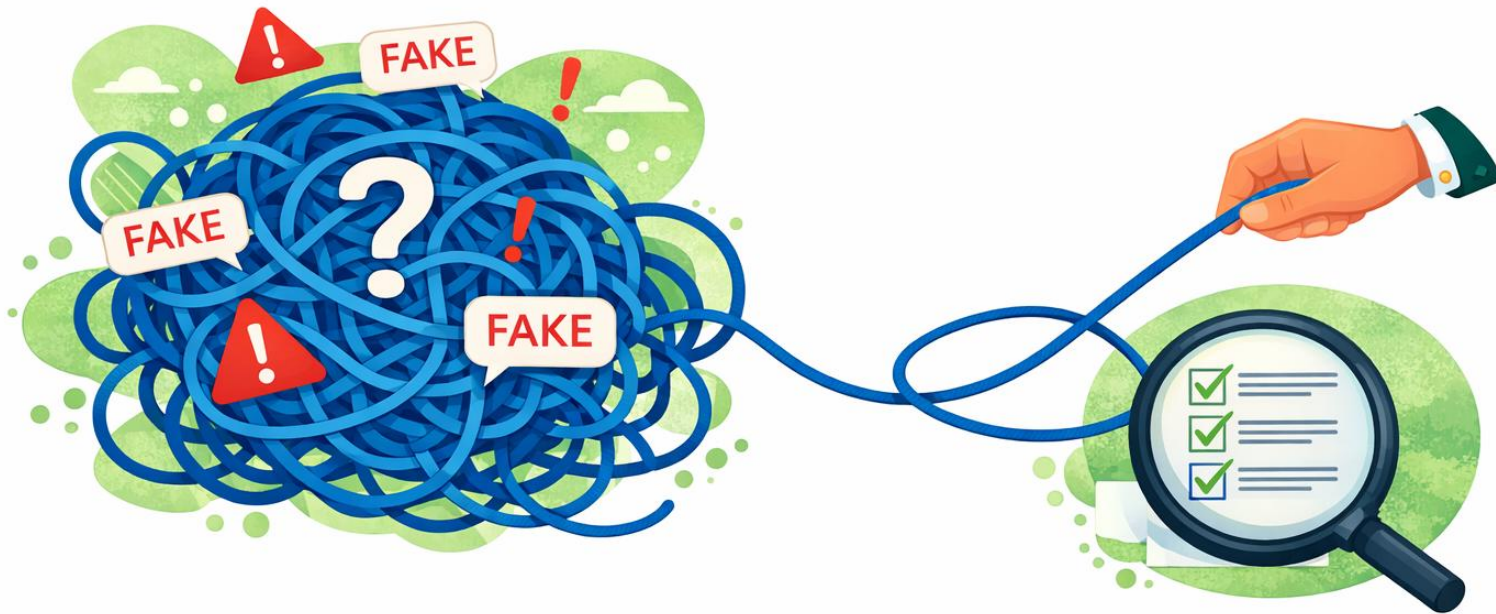
# Introduction and Opening Remarks

SUE KANER, CONSULTING TECHNICAL DIRECTOR, ERM UK  
ZOE WHITLOCK, PRINCIPAL ,ERM UK



Sustainability is our business

# The Truth Tangle: Untying Misinformation in Impact Assessment



We live in a time when information is abundant—but trust is fragile. In impact assessment, misinformation and disinformation can spread faster than evidence, shaping perceptions, polarising communities and challenging sound decision-making.

This session explores how false narratives take hold, why they matter, and what impact assessors can do to protect credibility, support meaningful consultation and strengthen trust in a contested, post-truth environment.



# Agenda

- Lessons from UK mega projects
- You are not listening!
- From extinction to negligible
- Questions & panel discussion
- Summing up & key takeaways

# Panel Members



**Paul Lawrence**

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Independent consultant.  
Shelburne Consulting Ltd.

Primary focus – Socio-economic elements of impact assessment, stakeholder engagement and training.



**Steve Green**

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As a physicist and Executive Director of JBS&G, Steve has been instrumental in establishing the company's culture, reputation, and continued growth. He also ran a space company.



Primary focus – Environmental impact assessment and management, reputational management and ESG, business development and AI.

**Sue Kaner & Zoe Whitlock**



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Sue Kaner (Technical Consulting Director) and Zoe Whitlock (Technical Consultant) are impact assessment specialists at ERM, working at the interface of technical analysis, stakeholder engagement and decision-making.



Impact assessment, stakeholder engagement and major infrastructure

# Why does misinformation take hold? - Lessons from UK Mega projects

# Misinformation is not a communication issue — it is a material risk to impact assessment

Misinformation can:

- Delay approvals
- Undermine evidence-based decision-making
- Shape consultation outcomes
- Erode or stunt relationships

It arises not just from “wrong facts” but:

- Emotional and place-based concerns
- Lack of trust in institutions and procedure
- Competing interpretations of evidence

In practice, misinformation becomes a project risk when it starts to influence how evidence is received — not just whether it is technically correct.

# So where does that leave us in the UK?

In the UK we have a:

- Strong legal framework with various acts (Planning Act, EIA Regulations etc )
- Structure consultation requirements
- Rigorous process for EIA – scoping , Preliminary Impact Assessment – Environmental Statement

But with this comes weaknesses

- Process heavy – not outcome focussed
- Consultation seen as procedural
- Political overlays national policy dictates necessity overriding local concerns
- The UK shows that strong regulation alone does not create trust.



# High Speed 2

Trust was undermined by wider project failures:

- Political controversy, environmental debates and costs overruns underpinned skepticism.
- Parliamentary scrutiny – placed under the microscope the overall benefits of the scheme.

The outcome:

- The EIA gets blamed for things outside its control (economics, delivery and politics!)
- The EIA becomes: reactive, defensive and perceived as biased.

Misinformation + trust issues are now core challenges in shaping IA practice.

# STOP HS2

ILLEGAL FEW	Ticket type SUPER EXCESSIVE VANITY PROJECT	Promised benefits MAINLY FOR VESTED INTERESTS
AYERS' ETS	Start date BEFORE THE PUBLIC REALISE IT'S A WASTE OF MONEY	Method of payment INCREASED CUTS TO ESSENTIAL SERVICES
	Valid NEVER HAS BEEN	Price £15.7 billion (2008) £32.7 billion (2010) £50.1 billion (2013) £55.7 billion (2015) £88.0 billion* (2019) £115.8 billion** (2020)
FINANCIAL K HOLE	Route ONE-WAY TO DISASTER Via 693 local wildlife sites, 108 irreplaceable ancient woodlands, 33 SSSIs and devastated communities	

£ StopHS2

\* If admitted this would more likely be over £100bn.  
\*\* Independent Review by Lord Berkeley  
[www.stophs2.org](http://www.stophs2.org)



# Mega Rail, Solar, Wind and much more

The UK government has said that it plans to determine at least 150 major infrastructure projects (NSIPs) by the end of this Parliament.

It has a very process-heavy EIA regime, yet projects receive:

- intense opposition
- legal challenges
- Long and expensive delays to consent

Projects are shrouded in strong local opposition and challenge around the information being shared, including:

- The legitimacy of the IA role in decision making.
- The ability of stakeholders to be meaningfully consulted and meaningfully represented in the IA and decision-making.



# 'Net Zero Necessity' - does national policy trump consideration for local impacts?

And now onshore wind is back!

UK government policy focussed on energy crisis and the need to have clean renewable energy and be energy independent driven through national policy.

Large utility scale onshore wind and solar farms gaining public backlash and distrust. Sense of hopelessness – can't fight national policy.

EIA becomes the decision of a decision already justified elsewhere.



# Lack of trust

## Stakeholders say:

- “The decision has been made don’t lie to us”
- “This consultation won’t change anything”.
- “You don’t know us and we aren’t represented in your assessment”.
- “You wont implement control measures or deliver mitigation.”
- “Our lived experiences tell us that we’ll be let down again.”

**EIA isn’t failing technically – it's struggling to maintain “social legitimacy” in mega project contexts.**

# Impact Assessment Complexity overload

## EIA is:

- Highly technical & document heavy ( yawn!)
- In-accessible – (acronyms galore!)

## Stakeholders say:

- This is impenetrable I don't understand and I can't participate - the system and processes are inaccessible.
- I'm wading through to find what is relevant to me.

## Opportunities:

- Consider making complexity navigable, not just simplified.
- IA practitioners are not just technical experts but need to prioritise being communicators and facilitators.

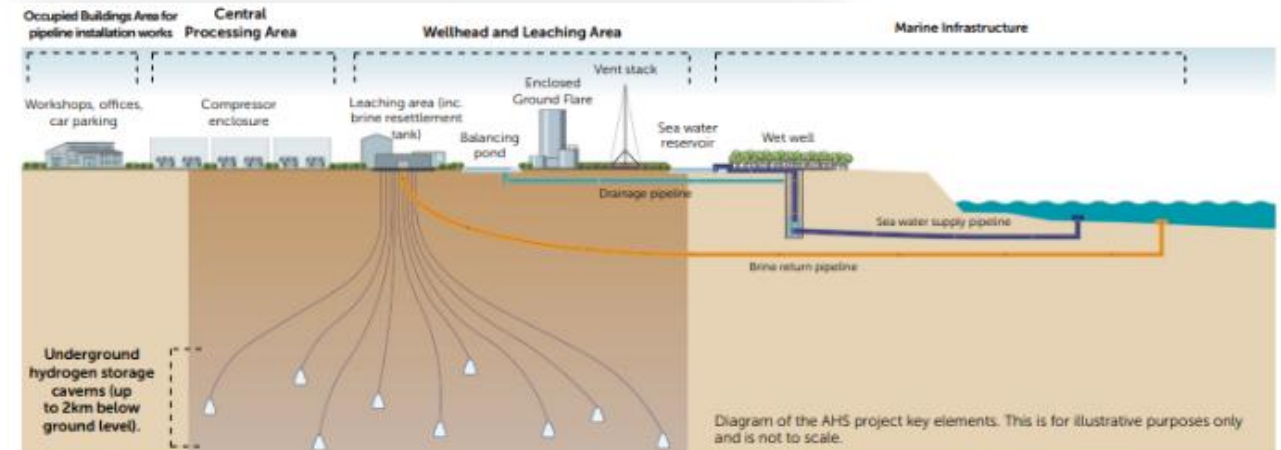


# Projects are getting complex too!

Complex projects mean complex assessments of potential effects, projects like:

- Storing hydrogen below ground in salt caverns
- Producing hydrogen offshore from floating wind
- Producing sustainable aviation fuel from methanol
- Extracting lithium from hard-rock

We're expecting a lot to assume information will be right first time!



# So, what are we doing about this?

Radical changes afoot in the UK with new Planning and Infrastructure Bill focus on moving from EIA to EORs (Environmental Outcome Reports)

Focus on moving on from compliance to influence. Developments will need to demonstrate benefits, environmentally socially and economically.

Stakeholder engagement – engaging at the right time

Honesty - what stakeholders can influence and better communication on uncertainty not just impacts and why decisions are made.

Also reframe the role of the assessor from the technical expert to trusted communicator and translator of complexity.

**EIA is not just about better science- it's about whether people believe the process genuinely shapes decisions.**

**I'll leave you with that thought!**



You are not listening!

# You are not listening!

- Insufficient consideration of how ESIA materials are received
- Two traps:
  - Public Relations
  - Discretionary social investment
- Solutions:
  - Clarify our objectives for engagement
  - Demonstrate procedural fairness
  - Demonstrate “free, prior and informed”
  - Demonstrate you are listening
  - Demonstrate how a project changed because of what you heard
  - Demonstrate where you disagree



# Albania

## Non-technical Summary, Reconstruction of Durres-Rrogozhine Railway Line



*Figure 38: Tunnel entrance*



*Figure 39: Dwelling, stable and olive orchard above the tunnel*



*Figure 40: Rrogozhine station (close-up)*



*Figure 41: Rrogozhine station (view from across the railway)*

UK

Viking Link converter station,  
delivered by NGV



LionLink Statutory Consultation , Project overview document - quick read

# Ukraine



Territorial control: Deepstatemap.live (January 12, 2025)

Map: RFE/RL Graphics • Source: Ukrainian Geological Survey, IAEA

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

# Stop Speaking in Acronym

- ESR	Environmental and Social Requirement	- CSO	Civil Society Organisation
- ESS	Environmental and Social Standard	- LA	Land Acquisition
- PS	Performance Standards	- LUR	Land Use Restriction
- ESP	Environmental and Social Policy	- LA/LUR	Land Acquisition and Land Use Restriction
- ESF	Environmental and Social Framework	- LAP	Land Acquisition Plan
- ESMSEnvironmental and Social Management System		- LAF	Land Acquisition Framework
- ESAP	Environmental and Social Action Plan	- PAP	Project-affected People
- ESA	Environmental and Social Assessment	- RP	Resettlement Plan
- ESCP	Environmental and Social Commitment Plan	- RF	Resettlement Framework
- ESIA	Environmental and Social Impact Assessment	- RAP	Resettlement Action Plan
- EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment	- SEA	Strategic Environmental Assessment
- EIS	Environmental Impact Statement	- SEP	Stakeholder Engagement Plan
- ESDDEnvironmental and Social Due Diligence		- SEF	Stakeholder Engagement Framework
- ESMF	Environmental and Social Management Framework	- SLO	Social License to Operate
- FPIC	Free Prior and Informed Consent		
- GLAC	Guide to Land Acquisition and Compensation		
- ICP	Informed Consultation and Participation		
- IP	Indigenous People		
- IP/SAHUTLC	Indigenous Peoples/Sub-Saharan African Historically Underserved Traditional Local Communities		
- IPP	Indigenous Peoples Plan		
- IPDP	Indigenous Peoples Development Plan		
- IPPF	Indigenous Peoples Planning Framework		
- IPO	Indigenous Peoples Organisation		
- NGO	Non-governmental Organisation		

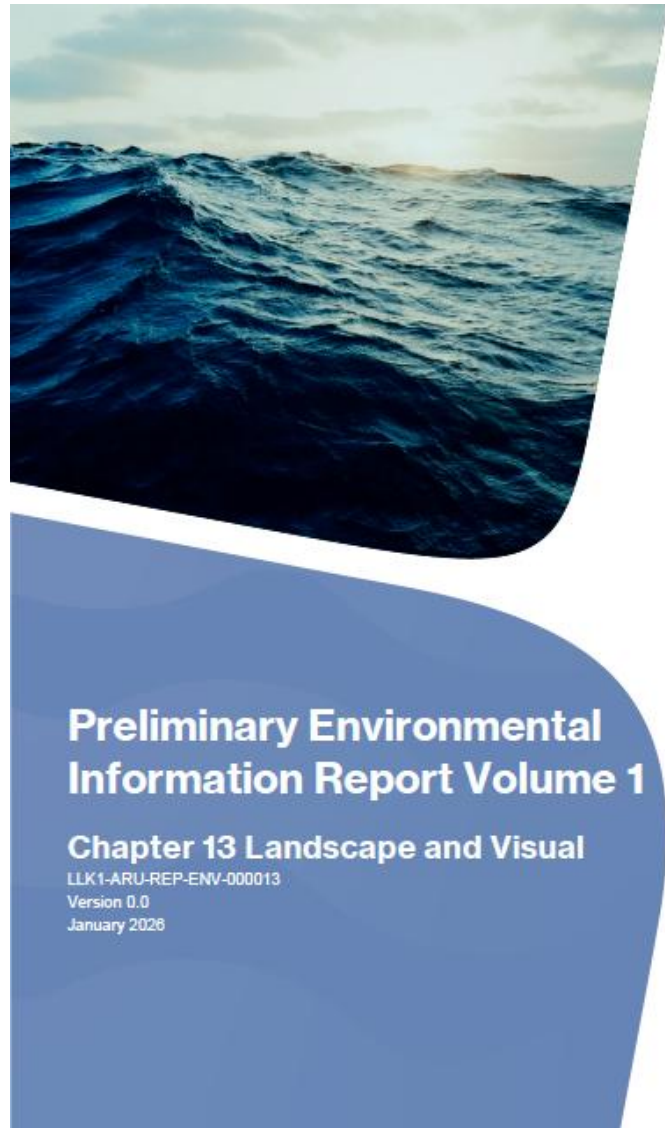
accessible	discriminated	inclusive	privilege
activism	discrimination	inclusive leadership	privileges
activists	discriminatory	inclusiveness	promote diversity
advocacy	disparity	inclusivity	promoting diversity
advocate	diverse	increase diversity	pronoun
advocates	diverse backgrounds	increase the diversity	pronouns
affirming care	diverse communities	indigenous community	prostitute
all-inclusive	diverse community	inequalities	race
allyship	diverse group	inequality	race and ethnicity
anti-racism	diverse groups	inequitable	racial
antiracist	diversified	inequities	racial diversity
assigned at birth	diversify	inequity	racial identity
assigned female at birth	diversifying	injustice	racial inequality
assigned male at birth	diversity	institutional	racial justice
at risk	enhance the diversity	intersectional	racially
barrier	enhancing diversity	intersectionality	racism
barriers	environmental quality	key groups	segregation
belong	equal opportunity	key people	sense of belonging
bias	equality	key populations	sex
biased	equitable	Latinx	sexual preferences
biased toward	equitableness	LGBT	sexuality
biases	equity	LGBTQ	social justice
biases towards	ethnicity	marginalize	sociocultural
biologically female	excluded	marginalized	socioeconomic
biologically male	exclusion	men who have sex with men	status
BIPOC	expression	mental health	stereotype
Black	female	minorities	stereotypes
breastfeed + people	females	minority	systemic
breastfeed + person	feminism	most risk	systemically
chestfeed + people	fostering inclusivity	MSM	they/them
chestfeed + person	GBV	multicultural	trans
clean energy	gender	Mx	transgender
climate crisis	gender based	Native American	transsexual
climate science	gender based violence	non-binary	trauma
commercial sex worker	gender diversity	nonbinary	traumatic
community diversity	gender identity	oppression	tribal
community equity	gender ideology	oppressive	unconscious bias
confirmation bias	gender-affirming care	orientation	underappreciated
cultural competence	genders	people + uterus	underprivileged
cultural differences	Gulf of Mexico	person-centered care	underrepresentation
cultural heritage	hate speech	person-centered	underrepresented
cultural sensitivity	health disparity	person-centered care	underserved
culturally appropriate	health equity	polarization	undervalued
culturally responsive	hispanic minority	political	victim
DEI	historically	pollution	victims
DEIA	identity	pregnant people	vulnerable populations
DEIAB	immigrants	pregnant person	women
DEJ	implicit bias	pregnant persons	women and
disabilities	implicit biases	prejudice	underrepresented
disability	inclusion		

Notes: Some terms listed with a plus sign represent combinations of words that, when used together, acknowledge transgender people, which is not in keeping with the current federal government's position that there are only two, immutable sexes. Any term collected above was included on at least one agency's list, which does not necessarily imply that other agencies are also discouraged from using it.

# *These Words Are Disappearing in the New Administration*

New York Times, March 7, 2025

# How are environmental materials received?



- Chapter 13 Landscape and Visual (147 pages)
- Appendix 13.1 Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment Methodology (29 pages)
- Appendix 13.2 Landscape Baseline and Effects (199 pages)
- Appendix 13.3 Visual Baseline and Effects (367 pages)
- PEIR Volume 3 Chapter 13 Figures (37 pages)
- ***Non-technical Summary*** (3 pages and one map)

# Two traps



## Social Investment



## Public Relations

# Clarify the objectives of engagement

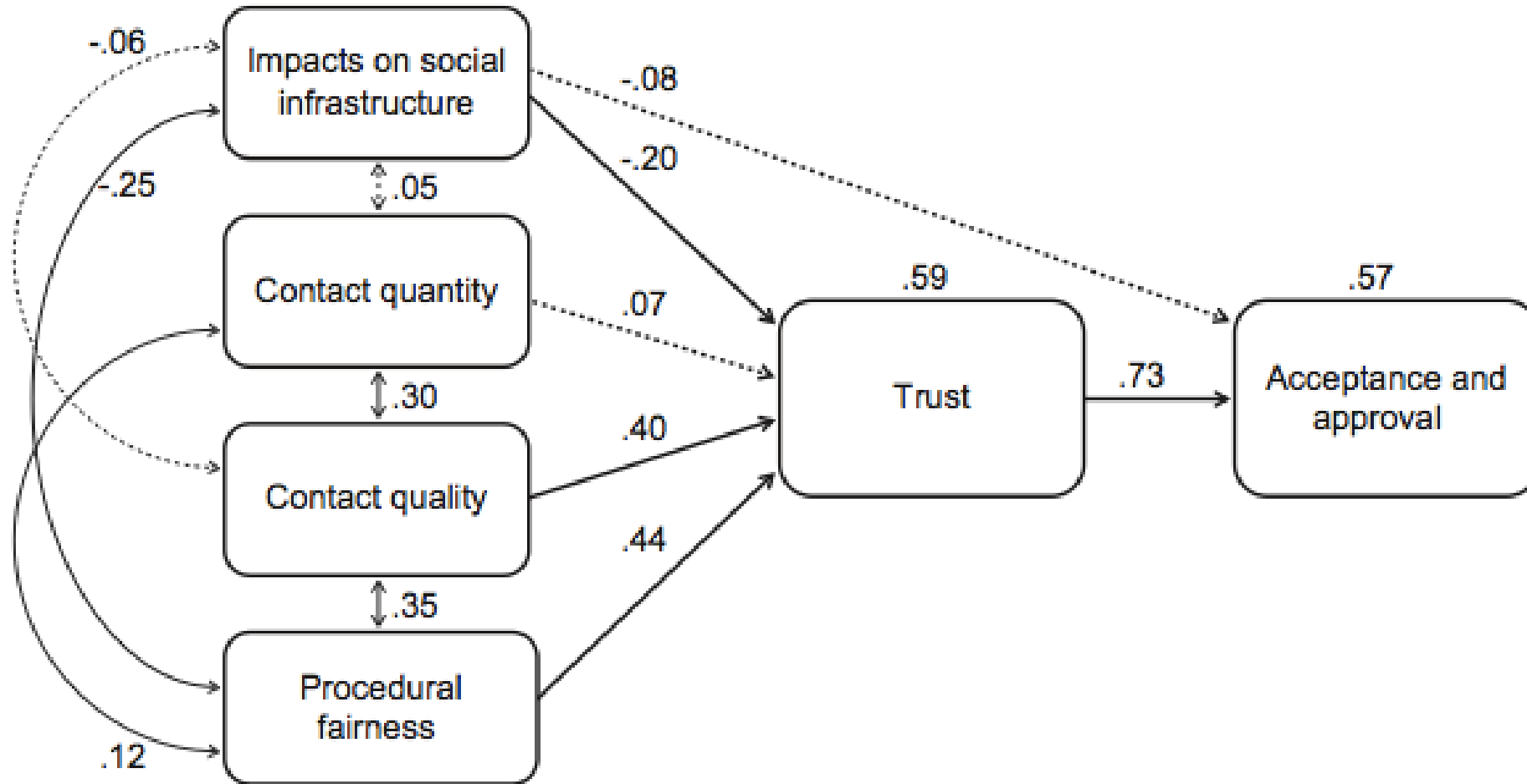
- To affect decision-making? How?
- To determine (broad community) support? By voting? On what? Who votes?
- To modify the project design?
- To achieve consensus or consent?
- Do all stakeholder understand consent in the same way?

But...

- To inform the scope of work for an impact assessment?

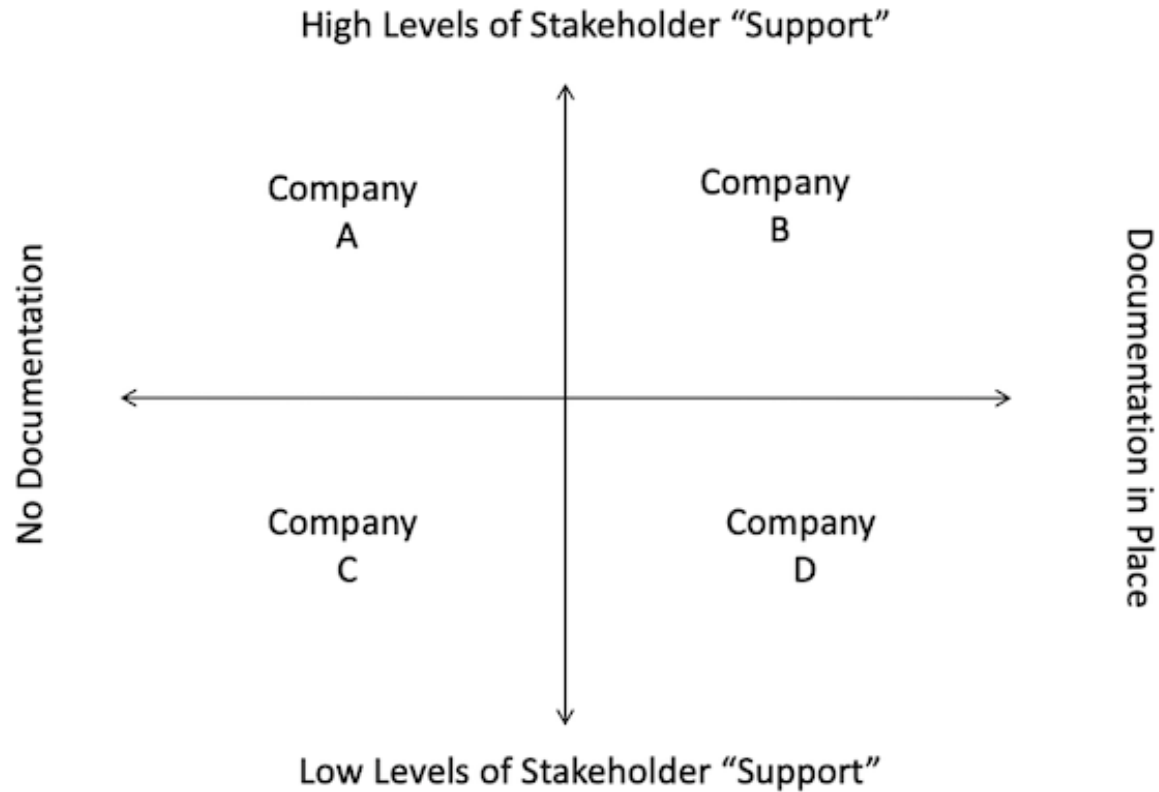


# Demonstrate Procedural Fairness



Source: K. Moffat and A. Zhang, 2013

# “Social Licence to Operate”



- Many projects/companies have support or “favorability” without well-documented performance.
- Which company has the optimal chance of development?
- Company B is optimal, but hard to achieve.
- When approaching partners and investors, would you rather work for Company A or D?

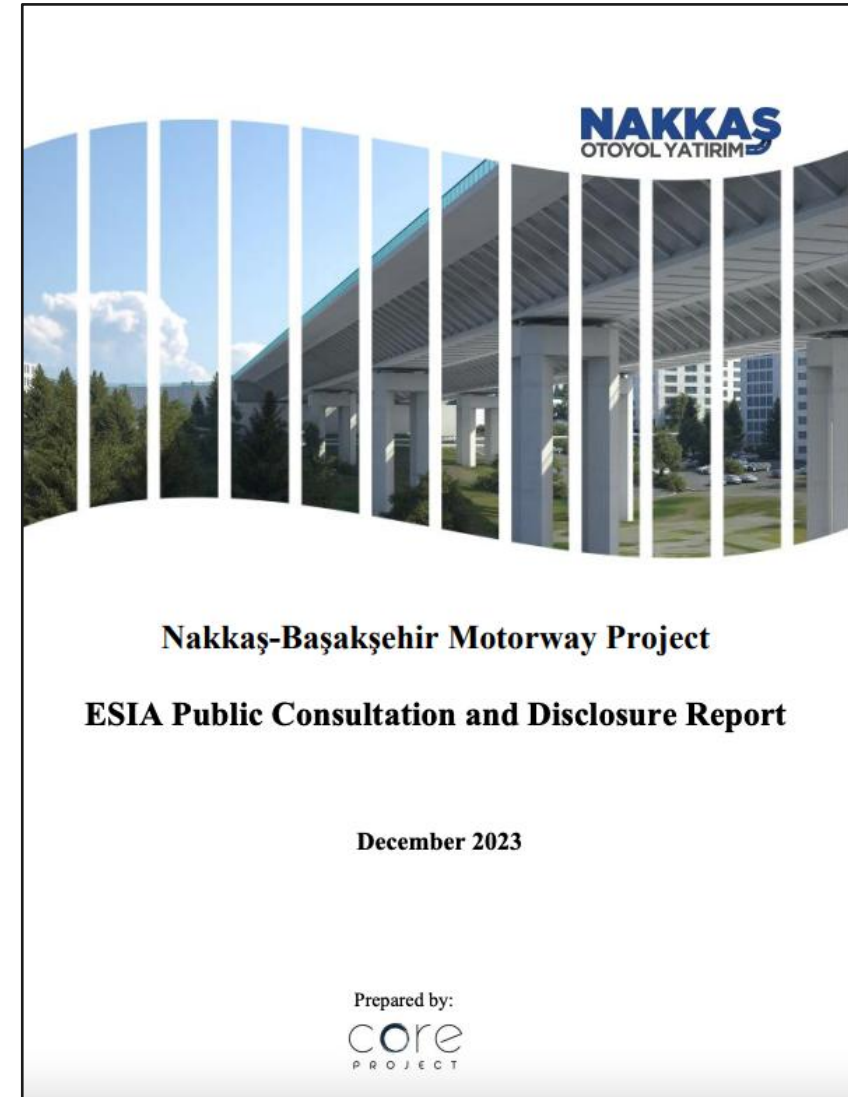
# Demonstrate Free, Prior and Informed



- “Free” (free of intimidation or coercion)
- “Prior” (timely disclosure of information)
- “Informed” (relevant, understandable and accessible information)

# Demonstrate Listening by...

- Quantifying engagement in a Public Consultation Report
  - Number of engagements
  - Number of people met
  - Number of issues raised
  - Representation of the frequency of issues raised
- Responding to what is asked
- **Asking if the response was sufficient**
- Directing people to exact location of data and information
- Inviting people to re-ask a question
- *And...*



# Demonstrate where you disagree



- *After...*
  - Summarising and quantifying issues, comments and questions
  - Summarising responses
  - Highlighting changes to project design and mitigation measures
- Summarise disagreements between project and any group or individual
- Disclosure clear response as to why agreement was not achieved

Thank you

# From extinction to negligible

# From extinction to negligible:

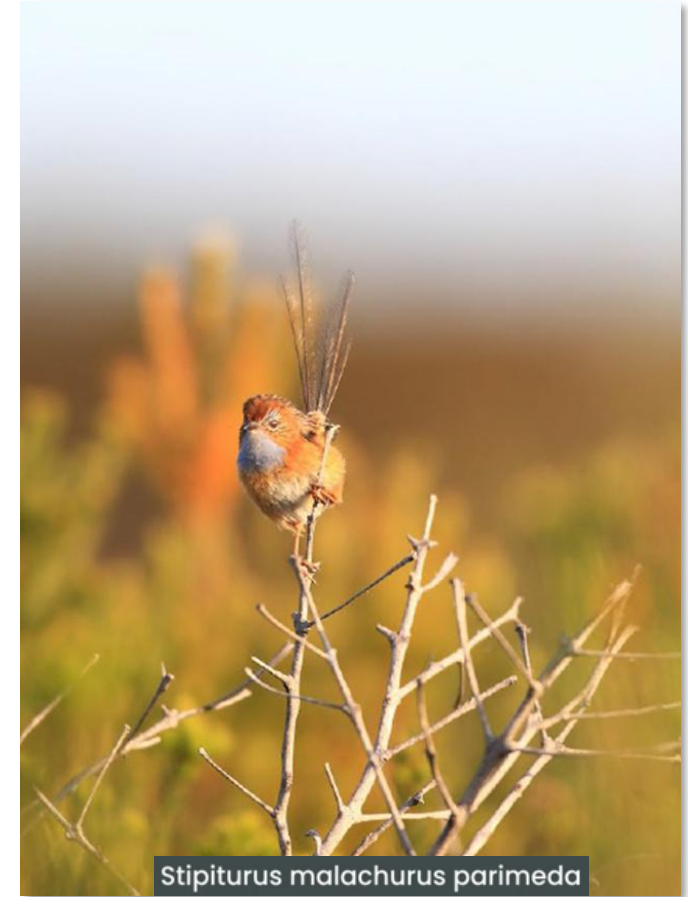
A case study of poor science leading to misinformation and loss of social licence

Rocket Launching

IAIA, Quebec City, May 2026

# Agenda

- Introductions
- Context
- Case Study
- The Hot Potato
- Solutions & Learnings



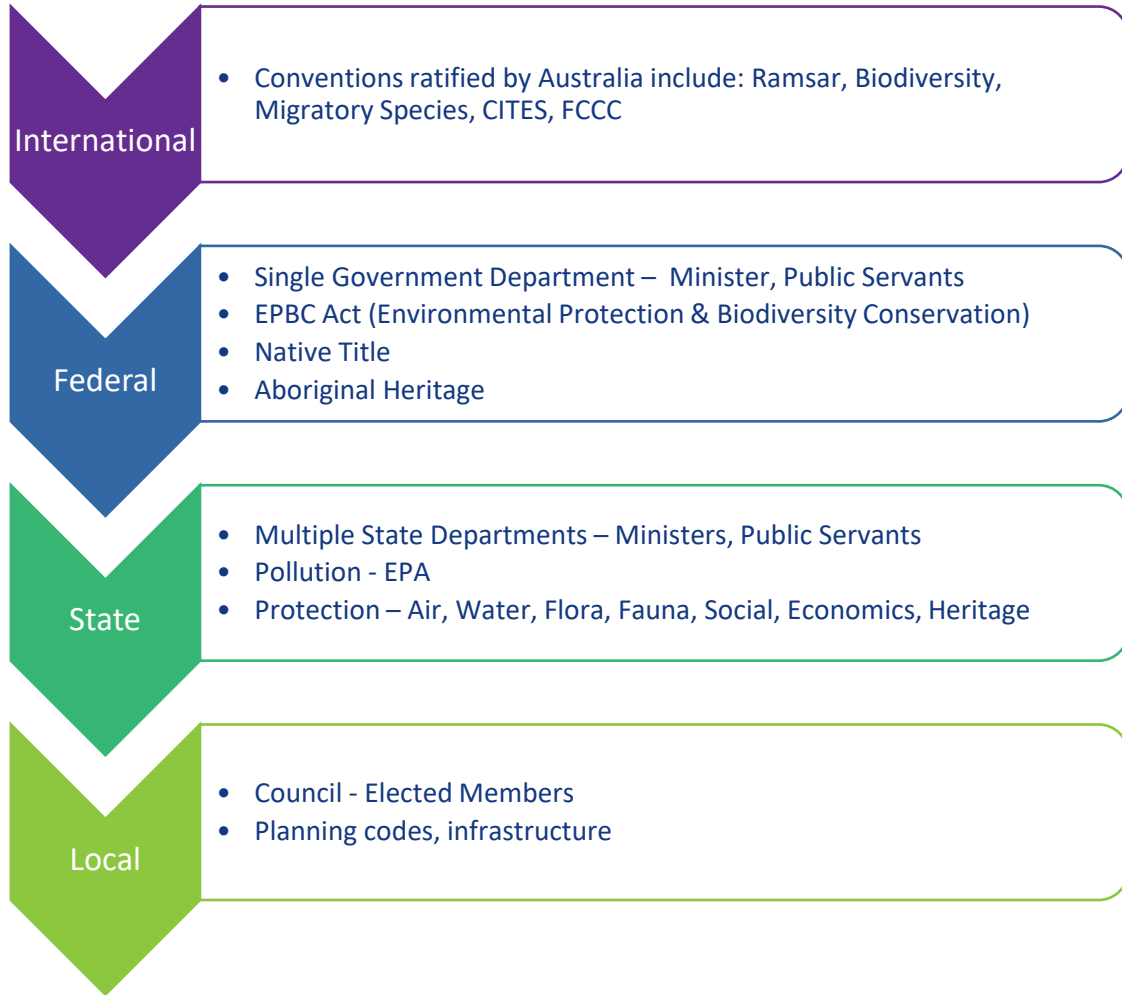
## Authors' Experience

### Steve Green & Lachie Wilkinson

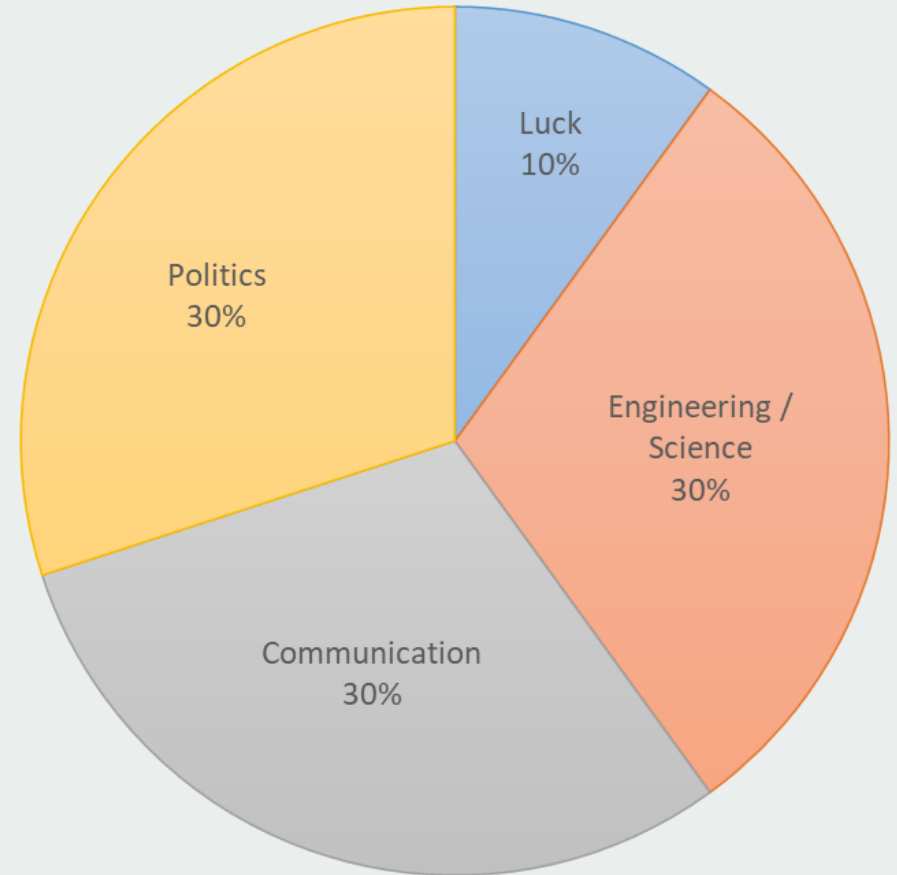
- Australia based
- >75 years experience combined
- Worked in government, industry and consulting
- >100 projects completed combined
- Extensive stakeholder engagement
- Subject Matter Experts in impact assessments



## Australian regulation: 4 layers of complexity



## The Real World



# The Project: Whaler's Way Orbital Launch Facility

## Who

- Proponent: Southern Launch, a privately owned, start-up company
- Approvals Consultant: JBS&G post State IA submission and prior to Federal IA submission

## What

- A rocket launch facility with two launch pads, assembly shed and control room

## Where

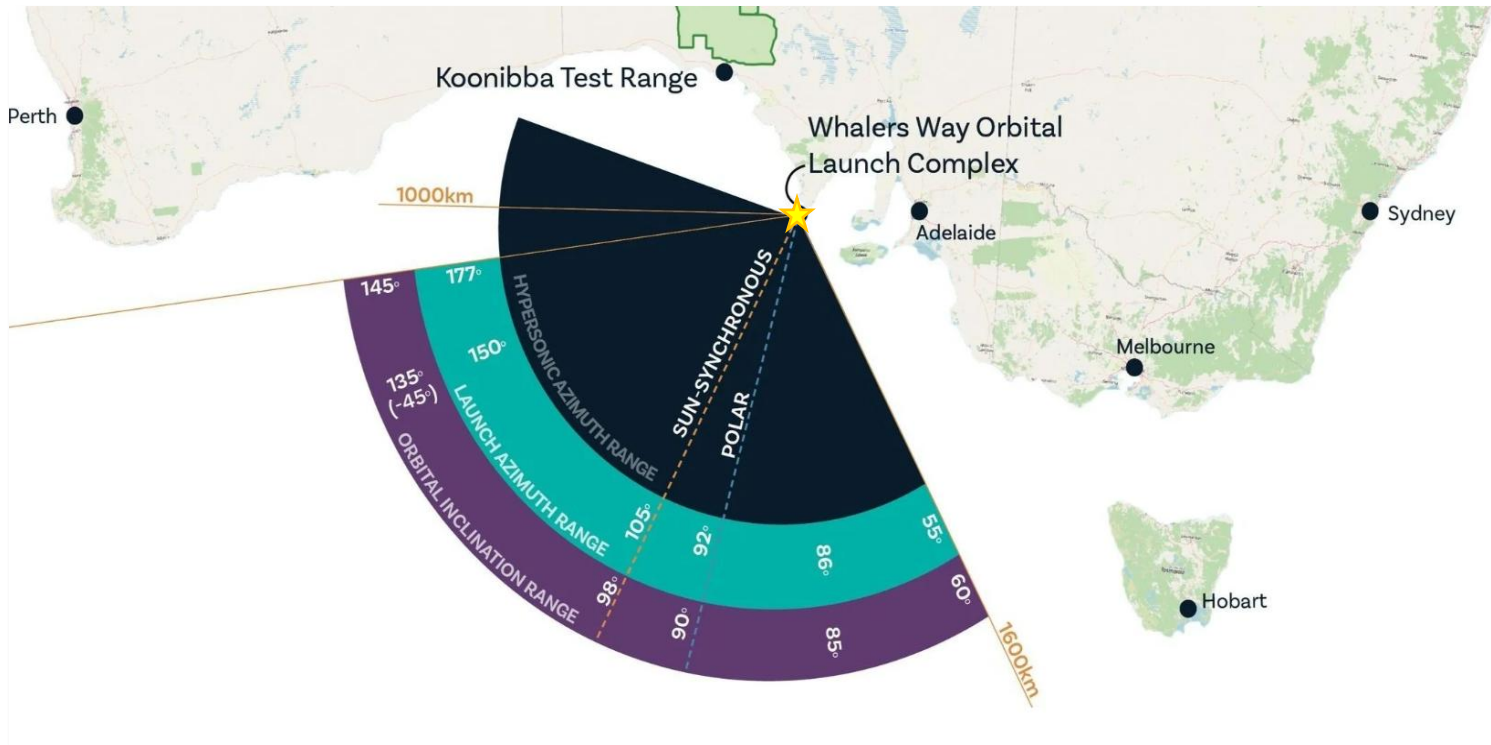
- On privately held land named 'Whaler's Way', 30 km from the region township of Port Lincoln on the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia
- Suitable for uninterrupted polar and sun-synchronous launch trajectories

## Why

- To service customers who wish to launch orbital and suborbital missions and hypersonic flight testing



## Location – Private land surrounded by conservation



## Site vegetation, proposed infrastructure and early launch testing



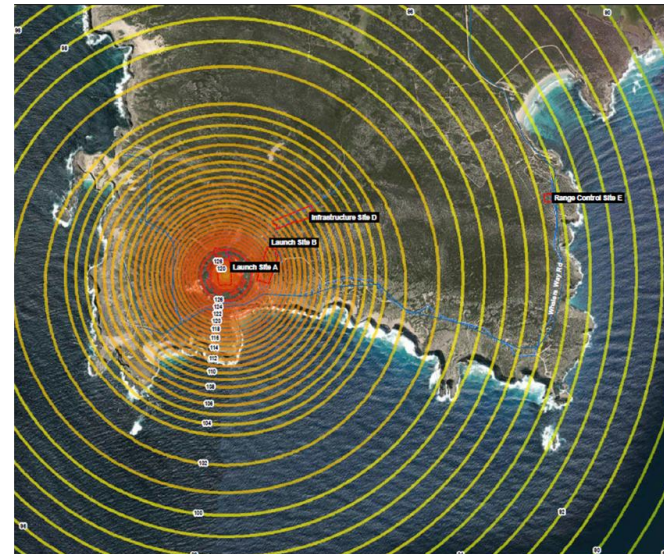
## Key Issue: Southern Emu-wren v Rocket noise

### Southern Emu-wren:

- Listed as endangered
- Estimated population less than 1000 birds
- Area of occupancy estimated as 50 – 75 km<sup>2</sup>

### State IA statements:

- Loud noise can cause permanent harm to birds
- Southern Emu-wren 'is sensitive to discrete, unpredictable disturbances such as sudden loud noises that can cause physiological effects, such as stress, avoidance and fright-flight responses'
- 'The Project is likely to reduce the area of occupancy for this species'



# Misinformation led to opposition campaign

**Birdlife Australia:**  
 ‘To permit the current action is to actively choose extinction for native wildlife’.



Source: Eyre Peninsula Environmental Protection Alliance

[Home](#) / [Get Involved](#) / [Support a Campaign](#) / [Save Whalers Way](#)

## Save Whalers Way

A proposed rocket launch facility on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula will destroy the habitat of threatened birds, in particular Mallee Whipbirds and Eyre Peninsula Southern Emu-wrens. Help save Whalers Way, by emailing key decision makers today!

EN ENDANGERED (EN)



### Have your say on Whalers Way

A proposed rocket launch facility on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula will destroy the habitat of threatened birds, in particular Mallee Whipbirds and Eyre Peninsula Southern Emu-wrens.

**Help us protect these threatened Aussie birds, by emailing key decision makers, today.**

**Simply:**

1. Enter your details in our [email tool](#)
2. (Optional) Explain why saving Whalers Way matters to you
3. Hit 'Send my email'

**Hot tip:** Customise the subject line of the email, to make it more likely to be noticed by decision makers and their staff.

**Help us save Whalers Way.** Use our email tool to help send a clear message – critical habitat for threatened species must be protected!

### Say no way to Whalers Way

Find your local rep

Compose your email

Subject: Don't blast the emu-wrens to extinction!

The Whalers Way Orbital Launch Complex has the potential to drive nationally and state threatened birds toward extinction. Habitat at the proposed site is critical to the survival of the endangered Eyre Peninsula Southern Emu-wren and the Mallee Whipbird.

There are estimated to be as few as 750 Eyre Peninsula Southern Emu-wrens remaining. National conservation advice (2023) explicitly states that to maintain and recover their population "habitat critical to the survival of the subspecies must not be destroyed or degraded". 80% of the remaining Mallee Whipbird population inhabits the southern Eyre Peninsula. The region is critical to their survival.

By supporting this campaign you give permission for BirdLife Australia to contact you about this campaign and other conservation campaigns.

[Send my email](#)

[How is my data used?](#)

A landscape photograph of a dry, open field with scattered trees and low-lying vegetation under a clear sky. The foreground is dominated by a large, dark blue geometric shape that overlaps the image. The text "Catch the hot potato..." is written in white on this blue shape. The background shows a wide expanse of reddish-brown soil with numerous small, light-colored bushes and several larger, dark green trees. The sky is a pale, clear blue.

**Catch the hot potato...**

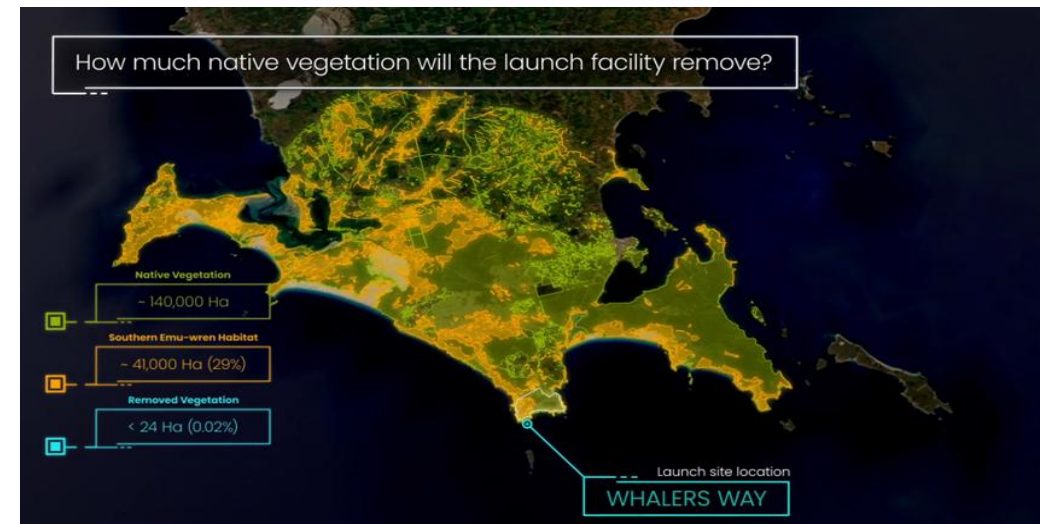
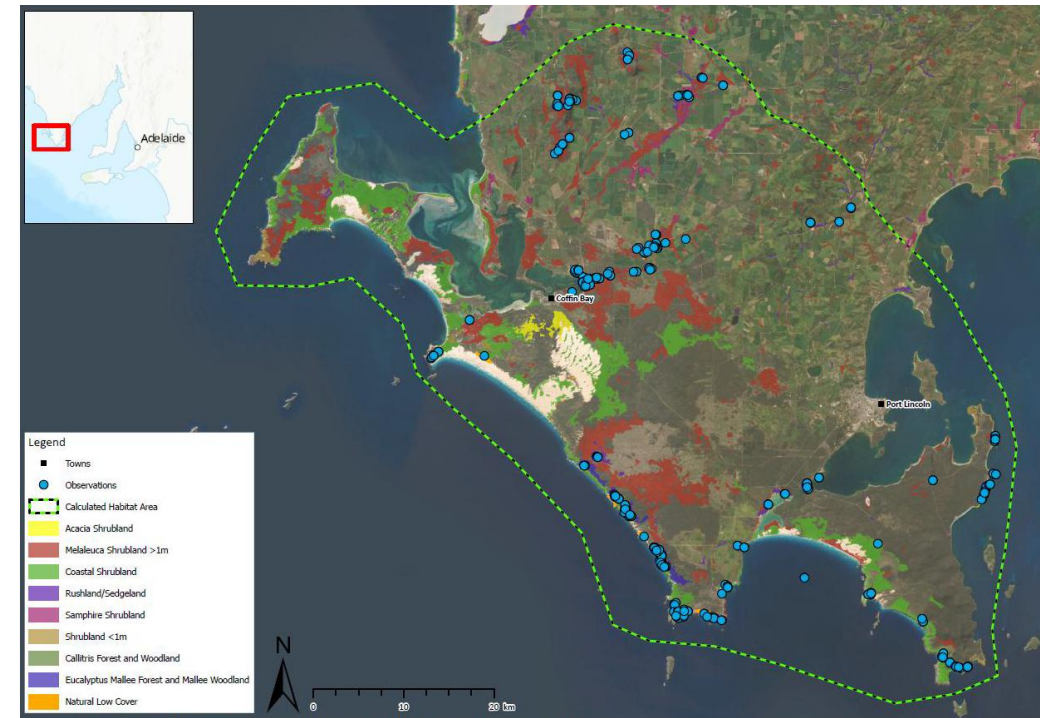
# What we did

## Good science!

- International literature review of impacts on birds at other launch sites
- Review the science of noise impacts on birds
- Extensive habitat mapping across Eyre Peninsula
- Further Emu-wren surveys

## Targeted communication

- Effective engagement with regulators
- Clearer presentation of the data, science and quantified impacts
- Animation to present the findings – ‘factual storytelling’
- Make findings available to all stakeholders



Florida Scrub-jay

Source: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission



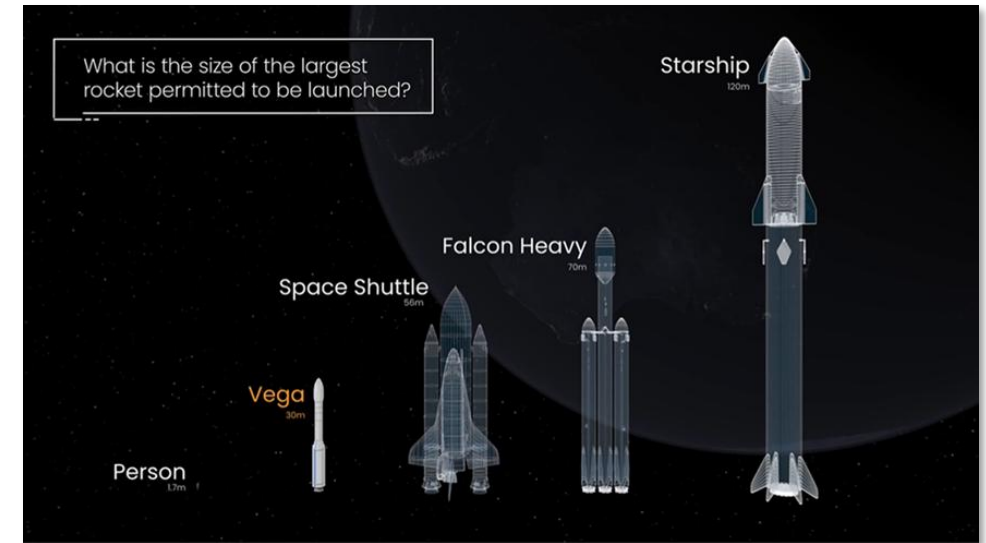
# The Findings

## Birds do not go deaf!\*

- Avifauna have different ear anatomy to mammals. They regrow hearing sensors. Rocket launches will not result in permanent hearing loss (Ref. Dooling R J, Popper A N, 2007)
- All animals, including birds, experience a 'startle' effect from a loud noise event
- The startle response is temporary with birds resuming their normal behaviour within minutes of the noise stopping (NASA- Final Constellation Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, 2008.)

## Southern Emu-wren (SE-W) will not go extinct via rocket launching

- 97% of the known habitat will not be affected by noise
- Only 3 % of the known habitat will be **temporarily** affected by any noise (0.005% of the year)
- With appropriate feral predator control and ongoing habitat management, future monitoring will validate the predicted protection and improvement of the population



\* From the short-term exposure scenario of a rocket launch



What does the noise from a rocket launch look like?



LEASED AREA

ALTITUDE 0.1 km

LAUNCH CLOCK 01 SEC

What does the noise from a rocket launch look like?



LEASED AREA

ALTITUDE 1.0 km

LAUNCH CLOCK 06 SEC

What effect will this have on the Southern Emu-wren?



ALTITUDE 4.6 km

As the rocket climbs, there is less noise directly below.

97% of Southern Emu-wren Habitat unaffected

LAUNCH CLOCK 24 SEC

What effect will this have on the Southern Emu-wren?



ALTITUDE 6.0 km

97% of Southern Emu-wren Habitat unaffected

LAUNCH CLOCK 31 SEC



What effect will this have on the Southern Emu-wren?

Temporary startle noise level 0.005% of the year

3% of Southern Emu-wren habitat may experience a **temporary** startle effect

97% of Southern Emu-wren Habitat unaffected

## Conclusion & Lessons

- Back to basics and keep it simple
  - Engage the community early and deeply listen
- Do good science!
  - Go beyond compliance for those issues that really matter
- Undertake factual storytelling using communication methods best suited to your audience
  - Recognise that few stakeholders read anymore and misinformation is easy to generate
- We received approval...**celebrate!**



// *Thank you for your undivided  
attention.*



# Questions & panel discussion



Thank you

Let's continue the conversation !

Sue Kaner , Consulting Technical Director  
Zoe Whitlock, Principal Consultant

[linkedin.com](#)

ERM  
UK

[ERM | Sustainability Consulting & Advisory  
Services](#)

