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Artificial Intelligence in Environmental Planning: An Authoritative Implementation Manual for CEQA, NEPA, and International Practice

Nader Khalil[1,*]

[1] CEQA.ai, Los Angeles, California, USA https://ceqa.ai

[*]Corresponding author: nader@ceqa.ai

Abstract

This guide is a practical framework for applying AI to environmental planning under CEQA, NEPA, and comparable international regimes. It distills core AI concepts, current regulations, and applications across the full planning lifecycle, from scoping and technical studies to drafting, public engagement, and monitoring. It provides implementation playbooks for governance, defensibility, and change management, supported by case studies. The approach prioritizes transparency, equity, and legal defensibility aligned with the NIST AI RMF and EPA's Meaningful Engagement Policy. The guide closes with emerging trends and a curated toolkit of datasets, tools, and training. It serves readers from junior analysts to senior practitioners and counsel.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, CEQA, NEPA, Environmental impact assessment, NLP, Computer vision, Remote sensing, Risk management, Public participation, Governance

1 Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has moved from exploratory pilots to operational tools that can accelerate document review, strengthen impact analyses, and broaden public participation. At the same time, agencies and courts increasingly scrutinize analytical transparency and procedural integrity. Responsible adoption therefore requires both technical literacy and regulatory fluency.

1.1 A brief history and evolution of AI in environmental planning

Early environmental applications used expert systems and statistical models for screening and forecasting. Advances in machine learning (ML), natural language processing (NLP), and computer vision (CV), particularly transformer architectures and large language models (LLMs), now enable rapid synthesis of environmental records, comment analysis at scale, and pattern detection in satellite and sensor data. Federal initiatives have signaled interest in modernizing environmental reviews with digital tools and AI (Council on Environmental Quality 2024b; Council on Environmental Quality 2024a). In parallel, risk and governance frameworks such as the NIST AI RMF and its Generative AI Profile provide structured controls to manage accuracy, bias, and traceability (National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024b; National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024a).

1.2 Core AI concepts for planners

- **Machine Learning (ML).** Statistical models that learn patterns from data for classification, regression, clustering, or anomaly detection. Key use cases include habitat suitability, traffic and VMT estimation, dispersion forecasting, and workload triage.
- **Natural Language Processing (NLP).** Techniques for text retrieval, summarization, and information extraction support scoping, alternatives screening, cumulative impacts synthesis, and comment analysis. LLMs amplify these capabilities but require risk controls and documentation.
- **Computer Vision (CV).** Deep learning over imagery (satellite, aerial, camera traps) supports land cover change, illegal dumping detection, and species monitoring (Willi et al. 2019; Gibellini, Fraternali, Boracchi, et al. 2024).

- **Predictive Modeling and Hybrid AI.** Combining physics-based models such as hydrodynamics or dispersion with ML can improve forecasts, for example flood alerts and wildfire impacts, while preserving scientific interpretability (Google Research 2023).
- **Explainability.** Methods like LIME and SHAP provide local and global explanations to support QA/QC and defensibility (Ribeiro, Singh, and Guestrin 2016; Lundberg and Lee 2017).

2 Regulatory Context

2.1 NEPA fundamentals and current developments

NEPA requires federal agencies to take a "hard look" at environmental consequences and to involve the public in decision making. Historically, Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations guided implementation. In 2025, CEQ rescinded its NEPA regulations following Executive Order 14154; agencies are updating their own NEPA procedures accordingly (Council on Environmental Quality 2025b; U.S. Department of the Interior 2025; Council on Environmental Quality 2025a). Practitioners should confirm the controlling agency procedures and any interim guidance for each action. CEQ's 2024 Report to Congress highlights opportunities for digital tools to improve reviews, including interagency interoperability and public access (Council on Environmental Quality 2024b).

2.2 CEQA fundamentals

CEQA requires lead agencies to analyze potential significant environmental effects, identify feasible mitigation, and consider alternatives. Recent practice emphasizes vehicle miles traveled (VMT) for transportation impact significance under SB 743 and early, meaningful consultation with California Native American tribes under AB 52. The Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) technical advisories provide practical methods for VMT assessment and tribal cultural resources consultation (California Governor's Office of Planning and Research 2018; Native American Heritage Commission and California Governor's Office of Planning and Research 2017; California Governor's Office of Planning and Research 2020).

2.3 Other relevant frameworks (domestic and international)

- **EPA public participation and environmental justice.** EPA's 2024 *Meaningful Engagement Policy* updates participation expectations across programs (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024a; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024c). EPA's EJScreen documentation (v2.3) describes methods for EJ indices used widely in screening; practitioners should track current availability and data access pathways (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024b; Harvard Environmental & Energy Law Program 2025; Society of Environmental Journalists 2025).
- **International impact assessment regimes.** The EU EIA Directive (2014/52/EU); Aarhus Convention; Canada's Impact Assessment Act (2019); World Bank ESF; IFC Performance Standards; Equator Principles (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2014; UNECE 1998; Government of Canada 2019; World Bank 2017; International Finance Corporation 2012; Equator Principles Association 2020).
- **Data protection.** AI workflows involving personal data must comply with GDPR in the EU and California privacy law (CCPA) where applicable (European Union 2016; State of California 2018).
- **AI governance.** The NIST AI RMF and Generative AI Profile (NIST AI 600-1) offer voluntary, widely cited controls for risk identification, monitoring, and documentation (National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024a; National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024b).

3 AI Applications Across the Workflow

3.1 Data collection and environmental baseline studies

Structured data. Automate ingestion and normalization from authoritative sources, for example USGS StreamStats, USFWS IPaC for listed species, and EPA emissions inventories (U.S. Geological Survey 2019; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2025).
Unstructured text. Use NLP to extract parameters, thresholds, and commitments from prior EIS/EIRs and permits.
Remote sensing and CV. Apply segmentation and classification to quantify land cover and detect activities such as waste piles (Gibellini, Fraternali, Boracchi, et al. 2024). For

biodiversity baselines, bioacoustic models like BirdNET can expand detection windows cost effectively (Kahl et al. 2021).

As summarized in Table 1, key AI capabilities align with each CEQA/NEPA phase.

Table 1: AI opportunities across CEQA/NEPA phases (illustrative).

Process Stage	**AI-Enabled Tasks**	**Illustrative Tools/Datasets (Refs.)**
Screening/Scoping	Corpus search; prior EIS/EIR retrieval; schedule risk triage; constraint discovery	NEPAccess (archival NEPA corpus); PNNL PermitAI / SearchNEPA (NEPAccess Team, University of Arizona 2025; Council on Environmental Quality 2024b; Pacific Northwest National Laboratory 2025a; U.S. Department of Energy 2025)
Baseline/Existing Conditions	Automated extraction; GIS joins; CV for land cover or species; audio bioacoustics	Landsat/Sentinel; BirdNET; camera-trap DL (Kahl et al. 2021; Willi et al. 2019)
Predictive Modeling	Hybrid ML plus physics for floods, air quality, traffic and VMT	Flood Hub; StreamStats hydrology tool (Google Research 2023; U.S. Geological Survey 2019)
Alternatives Analysis	Constraint mapping; multi criteria optimization; scenario narratives with guardrails	LLM assisted worksheets; SHAP to show drivers (Lundberg and Lee 2017)
Impact/Mitigation	NLP to locate thresholds and standards; similarity to precedents; mitigation libraries	NEPAccess derived precedents; agency manuals (NEPAccess Team, University of Arizona 2025)
Public Engagement	Comment deduplication, topic clustering, sentiment; multilingual summaries	EPA Meaningful Engagement; PNNL CommentNEPA (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024a; Pacific Northwest National Laboratory 2025a)
Record/Responses	Drafting assistance with linked citations; audit logs; traceable QA/QC	NIST AI RMF and GenAI Profile checklists (National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024b; National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024a)
Monitoring and compliance	CV for dumping detection; sensor and IoT anomaly detection; water quality nowcasts	Illegal waste CV; England pilot monitors (Gibellini, Fraternali, Boracchi, et al. 2024; Geddes 2024; Science Media Centre 2024)

3.2 Predictive modeling for environmental impacts

Hybrid approaches pair process models such as CFD, dispersion, or hydrology with ML for faster scenario sweeps, uncertainty propagation, and sensitivity analyses. Public platforms such as Google's Flood Hub illustrate ML enabled early warnings at scale (Google Research 2023). StreamStats assists with watershed delineation and flow statistics (U.S. Geological Survey 2019).

3.3 Automated drafting and compliance checking

LLMs can draft scoping summaries, affected environment sections, responses to comments, and mitigation monitoring tables. Keep models in assistant roles with human review. Enforce citation discipline by pinning every factual claim to a verifiable source, maintain an audit trail, and require structured prompts and checklists to reduce drift. CEQ's 2024 report encourages interoperable systems that support discoverability and traceability across agencies (Council on Environmental Quality 2024b). NIST's profile provides actionable controls for prompt hygiene, content provenance, and human and AI role clarity (National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024b).

3.4 GIS and remote sensing enhancements

Use multi sensor fusion (optical, SAR, thermal), change detection, and object detection to track construction footprints, vegetation loss, and restoration progress. For compliance and enforcement, CV pipelines have demonstrated time savings and higher detection rates of illegal dumping compared to manual photointerpretation (Gibellini, Fraternali, Boracchi, et al. 2024).

3.5 Stakeholder engagement tools

AI supports multilingual comment intake, duplicate detection, topic clustering, and accessibility, including readability and translation. EPA's *Meaningful Engagement Policy* articulates expectations for timely, inclusive processes; align AI enabled portals and summaries with those expectations (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024a). DOE and PNNL's *PermitAI* pilots AI for public comment triage and document search tuned to NEPA (Pacific Northwest National Laboratory 2025a; Pacific Northwest National Laboratory 2025b).

4 Implementation Strategies

4.1 Workflow integration with existing tools

Design pattern. Star schema around your DMS and GIS: (1) trusted data lake; (2) retrieval layer; (3) AI services for NLP and CV; (4) human QA; (5) publishing and audit.

Minimal viable stack. Document repository with vector search; prompt templates and guardrails; redaction; model registry; logging; approval workflows; and GIS connectors.

4.2 Data governance, transparency, and regulatory defensibility

Adopt documentation and risk controls that courts and agencies recognize as markers of reasoned decision making:

1. **Model documentation.** Use datasheets for datasets and model cards; record training data sources, known limitations, and evaluation metrics. Use SHAP or LIME for explainability where feasible (Ribeiro, Singh, and Guestrin 2016; Lundberg and Lee 2017).

2. **Human in the loop.** Define review checkpoints such as screening outputs, draft sections, and responses to comments. Require named, qualified reviewers for each checkpoint.

3. **Auditability.** Preserve prompts, model versions, parameters, and sources used in generated text; export immutable logs for the administrative record.

4. **Risk management.** Map controls to NIST AI RMF and the Generative AI Profile categories, including data quality, harmful content, human and AI configuration, and provenance (National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024b; National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024a).

5. **Privacy and equity.** If personal data are processed, apply GDPR and CCPA principles such as data minimization and purpose limitation, and ensure EJ analyses remain transparent and reproducible as tools evolve (European Union 2016; State of California 2018; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024b; Harvard Environmental & Energy Law Program 2025).

4.3 Change management and staff training

- **Roles and responsibilities.** Assign AI leads, QA coordinators, data stewards, and records managers.

- **Training ladder.** First, AI literacy for all staff; second, tool specific SOPs; third, legal

defensibility and records; fourth, bias and accessibility; fifth, incident response and model updates.

- **Pilots.** Start with low risk, high volume tasks such as document retrieval and summarization before analytical tasks such as significance determinations or alternatives.

4.4 A defensibility checklist (authoritative quick reference)

1. **Scope and purpose documented.** State what the AI will and will not do, and cite governing procedures or guidance (Council on Environmental Quality 2024b; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024a).
2. **Data provenance captured.** Record sources, versions, timestamps, and licenses for all inputs.
3. **Validation plan executed.** Pre deployment tests on representative cases; post deployment monitoring with error budgets and drift alerts (National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024b).
4. **Human review points specified.** Named reviewers, criteria, sign offs, and administrative record export capability.
5. **Privacy and EJ reviewed.** Privacy impact assessment where relevant, and EJ screening methods and reproducibility (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024b).
6. **Public participation aligned.** Accessibility, multilingual support, timelines per agency policy (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024a).
7. **Records ready.** Prompts, system messages, model IDs, seeds, parameters, and citations archived and Bates stamped for the administrative record.

5 Case Studies and Examples

5.1 United States

PNNL *PermitAI* (DOE): pilot tools such as SearchNEPA, EngageNEPA, and CommentNEPA to streamline search and public comment review, and development of the NEPA Text Corpus (Pacific Northwest National Laboratory 2025a; U.S. Department of Energy

2025; Pacific Northwest National Laboratory 2025b).
NEPAccess (University of Arizona): a data science and AI platform to discover and analyze decades of NEPA documents and comments, recognized by CEQ's 2024 report (NEPAccess Team, University of Arizona 2025; Council on Environmental Quality 2024b).
Flood early warning (global, US led technology): AI driven flood alerts scaling to dozens of countries demonstrate hybrid ML plus hydrology for public benefit (Google Research 2023).

5.2 United Kingdom

Bathing water pilots: real time monitoring and AI nowcasting to predict bacterial loads and inform swimmers; initial pilots reported high predictive accuracy and public facing alerts (Geddes 2024; Science Media Centre 2024).

5.3 European Union

Illegal waste detection: CV pipelines in collaboration with environmental agencies achieved higher detection rates and time savings over manual methods, illustrating enforcement support potential (Gibellini, Fraternali, Boracchi, et al. 2024).

5.4 New Zealand

AI for the Environment report identified remote sensing and CV applications, for example contamination scanning, for regulatory agencies and provided a roadmap for pilots (AI Forum New Zealand 2022).

5.5 Biodiversity monitoring

Bioacoustics and camera traps: BirdNET and camera trap deep learning models scale species detection and occupancy estimation for baseline studies and monitoring (Kahl et al. 2021; Willi et al. 2019).

Lessons learned. Start with open, auditable datasets, begin in assistant and triage roles, preserve thorough records, align with public participation policies, and validate with ground truth.

6 Ethics, Risk, and Legal Considerations

Bias and representativeness. Skewed training data can mischaracterize EJ burdens or downplay localized effects. Use stratified sampling, counterfactual evaluation, and domain adaptation where needed (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024b).

Explainability and the hard look. Explanations such as SHAP feature attributions help demonstrate reasoned analysis and support responses to comments (Lundberg and Lee 2017).

Audit trails and administrative record readiness. Preserve all materials necessary to reconstruct the analysis. Courts expect transparent reasoning and policymakers expect meaningful engagement (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024a).

Resource footprint. Consider the energy and water demands of model training and inference; prefer smaller, domain tuned models where they meet quality thresholds (Strubell, Ganesh, and McCallum 2019; Patterson, Gonzalez, Le, et al. 2021).

Shifting NEPA rules. Because CEQ regulations were rescinded in 2025, verify the controlling agency procedures and memorialize compliance choices in the administrative record (Council on Environmental Quality 2025b; U.S. Department of the Interior 2025; Council on Environmental Quality 2025a).

7 Future Trends and Opportunities

- **Retrieval augmented generation with agency corpora.** Greater use of authoritative retrieval, for example NEPA text corpora, to improve factuality and citations.
- **Foundation models fine tuned for permitting.** Smaller, instruction tuned models with built in policy checklists and source citation enforcement (National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024b).
- **Multimodal analysis.** Joint NLP and CV for integrated impact narratives that combine text and satellite change.
- **Participatory AI.** Co design of engagement bots and dashboards aligned with EPA policy and accessibility requirements (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024a).
- **Policy harmonization.** Convergence among AI governance (NIST), privacy (GDPR and CCPA), and EIA practice to reduce uncertainty.

8 Resource Appendix

8.1 Recommended tools, platforms, and datasets

Document discovery: NEPAccess project site and documentation (NEPAccess Team, University of Arizona 2025; Council on Environmental Quality 2024b).
NEPA AI pilots: PNNL *PermitAI* including SearchNEPA, EngageNEPA, and CommentNEPA (Pacific Northwest National Laboratory 2025a; Pacific Northwest National Laboratory 2024).
Hydrology: USGS StreamStats app and API (U.S. Geological Survey 2019).
Species review: USFWS IPaC project planning tool (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2025).
Remote sensing: Landsat and Sentinel 2 user guides; CV pipelines for waste detection and habitat mapping (Gibellini, Fraternali, Boracchi, et al. 2024).
Public participation: EPA *Meaningful Engagement Policy* and training materials (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024a; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024c).
Governance: NIST AI RMF and Generative AI Profile (National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024a; National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024b).

8.2 Step by step implementation checklists

Pilot setup (30–60 days).

1. Select one use case such as EIS retrieval plus summarization.
2. Assemble a gold standard set of 10–20 documents with accepted answers.
3. Configure retrieval augmented generation with authoritative repositories and logging.
4. Draft SOPs for prompts, review, and administrative record export.
5. Validate against the gold set, and document errors and fixes.

Scale up (3–9 months).

1. Add comment analysis and mitigation libraries.
2. Integrate GIS and remote sensing outputs.

3. Introduce explainability dashboards for analyst review.

4. Conduct privacy and EJ reviews; finalize training.

8.3 Further reading and training

NIST AI RMF Playbook; EPA participation resources; OPR advisories on SB 743 VMT and AB 52 tribal consultation; international EIA guidance for the EU, World Bank, IFC, and Equator Principles (National Institute of Standards and Technology 2024a; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2024a; California Governor's Office of Planning and Research 2018; Native American Heritage Commission and California Governor's Office of Planning and Research 2017; World Bank 2017; International Finance Corporation 2012; Equator Principles Association 2020).

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