

Improving bathing water quality, the Blue Flag - Europe

1. Policy Objective & Theme

- SUSTAINABLE USE OF RESOURCES: Preserving coastal environment (its functioning and integrity) to share space
- SUSTAINABLE USE OF RESOURCES: Sound use of resources and promotion of less resource intensive processes/products
- SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH: Balancing economic, social, cultural development whilst enhancing environment

2. Key Approaches

- Integration
- Participation
- Ecosystems based approach

3. Experiences that can be exchanged

Eco-labels (or awards) can serve as a mechanism to guide industry actors to improve their performance by providing defined operational guidelines. They also serve as a communication tool for consumers in highlighting products and services that have met or exceeded a set of defined criteria. The Blue Flag Programme has demonstrated improvements not only in the direct management of beaches, marinas and boat activity, but also the management of coastal zones as a whole, where they are implemented.

4. Overview of the case

The Blue Flag Programme is an example of a current tool for facilitating coastal zone management, raising awareness and communication information by improving not only the environmental quality of beaches and marinas but their management in a holistic way.

5. Context and Objectives

a) Context

Tourism is one of the world's largest industries and one that heavily depends on the natural resource base. Attractive coastal landscapes such as sandy beaches, dune areas, estuaries, and coastal lakes are preferred sites for tourism development. The tourism industry makes significant contributions to the economies of many developing nations particularly to foreign exchange earnings, employment, and GDP. Recreation, when properly planned and managed, can minimise impacts on coastal environments and serve as a driving force in bringing sustainable tourism as a vehicle of development to local communities and destinations. However, uncontrolled and ill planned tourism significantly degrades the environment.

The Blue Flag Programme is a voluntary certification scheme. It started in France in 1987, the "European Year of the Environment", with the purpose of encouraging beaches to comply with the EU Bathing Water Directive 76/160/EEC. The Foundation for Environmental Education presented the concept of the Blue Flag to the European Commission and they agreed to help launch the Blue Flag Programme as one of several other activities that year. The original French concept of covering sewage treatment and bathing water quality was developed to include other issues such as waste management and coastal planning and protection. Marinas also became eligible for the programme. In 1987, 244 beaches and 208 marinas from 10 countries were awarded the Blue Flag. Since then, the criteria have become more holistic and encompassing and the criteria have also become more stringent. As the programme spread to more European countries after 1987, each country developed

their own version of the Blue Flag beach criteria. It was later decided that consolidation was needed and in 1992 the beach criteria were merged into one European version. The programme moved outside of Europe in 2001. Today, all participating countries follow the same International Blue Flag criteria for both beaches and marinas, with some regional variations.

b) Objectives

The Blue Flag works towards sustainable development at beaches/marinas through strict criteria dealing with water quality, environmental education and information, environmental management, and safety and other services. The main objectives of the Blue Flag Programme are to improve understanding of the coastal environment and to promote the incorporation of environmental issues in the decision-making processes of local authorities and their partners through awareness and education.

6. Implementation of the ICZM Approach (i.e. management, tools, resources)

a) Management

The Blue Flag Programme is owned and run by the independent, non-profit organisation Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE). It has member organisations in 48 countries as of June 2007.

b) ICZM tools

The Blue Flag programme is designed to raise environmental awareness and increase good environmental practices among tourists, local populations and beach and marina management and staff. The two main elements related to the Blue Flag Programme are Criteria & Control and Monitoring. The award is given to beaches that comply with 29 criteria covering aspects of: Water Quality e.g. No industrial or sewage related discharges may affect the beach area; Environmental Education and Information e.g. Information about bathing water quality must be displayed; Environmental Management e.g. Facilities for receiving recyclable waste materials must be available on/by the beach; and Safety and Services e.g. An adequate number of lifeguards and/or lifesaving equipment must be available at the beach. The growth of recreational boating and marinas has prompted a growing awareness of the need to protect the environmental quality of waterways as an integral part of the management of coastal areas. Hence, there is now a Blue Flag marina award based upon compliance with 22 criteria. The Blue Flag criteria are revised and updated every 5 years. The beach criteria were last revised in 2006 and the marina criteria in 2004. The Blue Flag award is given for only one season at a time.

Application procedures for beaches involve a process in which the responsible local authority (municipality) files the application form with the National Blue Flag Operator with enclosed documentation, usually following consultations with local stakeholders. In the case of marinas, the marina operator/management applies for the Blue Flag. The applications are reviewed first by a National Jury and then by an International Jury. If the candidate is approved then the award is given for the coming season. During the season the site is monitored to assure it is in compliance with the Blue Flag criteria.

The Blue Flag Programme is, therefore, co-ordinated locally, nationally and internationally. The international coordination is carried out by FEE through the International Coordinator located in Copenhagen, Denmark. The running of the programme at the national levels is done through the FEE member organisation in that country which acts as the National Coordination. The National Blue Flag Jury is the "politically" responsible body for the national campaign and generally contains representatives of government ministries or departments.

Consultation, assessment and monitoring are essential components to ensure compliance with the adopted criteria. During the Blue Flag season the awarded sites must be in full compliance with the Blue Flag criteria. It is the responsibility of the local authorities/marina managers to ensure that their sites are in full compliance at all times. If compliance is not met the flag is withdrawn and the National Operator notified of the situation. The reason the flag has been withdrawn is also posted for the public on the Blue Flag Information Board at the site.

7. Cost and resources

The costs incurred are: application fee (€250), annual FEE membership dues (€3,350-4,650 depending upon the GDP of the country); the annual Blue Flag levy per beach/marina (€30-36); purchasing of flags. Other costs are for sampling & monitoring

and signage etc.

8. Effectiveness (i.e. were the foreseen goals/objectives of the work reached?)

In the EU, including overseas territories, there were 2,244 certified beaches and 573 certified marinas in the 2008/09 season. It has become a symbol of quality recognized by tourists and tour operators around the world and brings a reliable guarantee regarding the environmental quality of tourist beaches and marinas. It has served to encourage local authorities and other tourism stakeholders to constantly enhance the environmental quality of their bathing waters and other tourism facilities, and of their destinations as a whole. Some examples from Europe: In Finland, the Blue Flag criteria have been taken a step further with toilet water pump-out facilities demanded at marinas, as part of the solution for solving the eutrophication problem of the Baltic Sea. In Ireland, the Blue Flags are almost always presented by the Minister for the Environment at a National Award ceremony and the programme is seen as a very important component in coastal zone management for the country. Slovenia has started to develop a Blue Flag e-application system to reduce the use of paper and ink to promote a paperless communication that could be used worldwide.

9. Success and Fail factors

The Programme gives a positive reinforcement by highlighting the achievements of the award-winning beaches and marinas. There is broad participation involving local and national stakeholders. It is voluntary but independent so that the award system cannot be influenced by local or financial interests.

Some municipalities do not apply for a Blue Flag because of concern that were it to be withdrawn it would give negative publicity which would affect the tourist market. The cost is now also a significant factor especially with other award schemes available.

10. Unforeseen outcomes

In many beach communities, there is now considerable pride in the possession of a Blue Flag, which is manifested through celebrations when the flag is raised.

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13. Sources

- 20 years of Blue Flag (2007) Foundation for Environmental Education
- Awards for Improving the Coastal Environment: The example of the Blue Flag (2007) Foundation for Environmental Education
- Blue Flag Beach Criteria and Explanatory Notes 2008-2009 (2008) Foundation for Environmental Education
- www.blueflag.org
- www.fee-international.org



20 years of blue flag (1.27 MB) 



Awards for Improving the Coastal Environment (741.9 KB) 



Blue Flag Beach Criteria and Explanatory Notes (211.27 KB) 