



Perceived effectiveness of Blue Flag certification as an environmental management tool along Ontario's Great Lakes beaches



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ABSTRACT

Beach certification schemes, such as Blue Flag, have become prevalent in the current literature as a beach management tool is said to bridge the gap between recreation and conservation. Although there is evidence that Blue Flag has gained wide recognition globally, there has been limited research done to determine if Blue Flag is actually being successfully used as a tool for environmental protection. This study, therefore, investigates the effectiveness of Blue Flag as a management tool for environmental protection for beaches in Ontario, Canada. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with beach managers along the shoreline of the Great Lakes who represent a municipality involved in the Blue Flag program. The key findings of this research reveal that currently Blue Flag is not being used as an effective beach management tool for environmental protection as this study indicates that beach managers do not think that municipalities adopting Blue Flag will have a direct impact on improving the health and protection of the Great Lakes.

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1. Introduction

Ontario's Great Lakes beaches offer services that are vitally important for both environmental and economic benefit. Recent policy and governance actions across multiple levels of government are recognizing the importance of protecting beaches along the Great Lakes. These invaluable ecosystems are under stress from a variety of causes, including heavy use for recreation and tourism. The pressure that results from beach tourism can often lead to serious environmental degradation, and it is therefore critical that beach management be effective at protecting the beach environment and preserving it for the future. Beach managers have been criticized for inappropriate beach management strategies that focus solely on the recreation and tourism needs of the beach, and disregard measures to protect the beach environment.

Ontario's Great Lakes Strategy (2012) has identified the Blue Flag certification as the standard for healthy beaches in Ontario, and has suggested further adoption of the program. Despite claims that beach certifications such as Blue Flag can be used as tools to benefit the beach environment, there has been very little research

conducted to determine how effective this eco-award actually is for beach management and environmental protection. The research question, therefore was: To what extent is the Blue Flag certification program an effective management tool for environmental protection of beaches? Five objectives were outlined in order to answer the research question:

1. What are the key issues municipalities face with regard to beach protection?
2. What are the successes municipalities have accomplished with regard to beach protection?
3. Which of these successes can be attributed to Blue Flag criteria?
4. What motivations or hindrances do managers have in adopting the Blue Flag program?
5. To what extent is Blue Flag being used as a management tool for environmental protection versus a driver for tourism or economic benefit?

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining beach management

There is not one universally accepted form of beach

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management, and research into effective beach management is a relatively new discipline (Williams and Micallef, 2009). The development of an effective beach management strategy is not easy and beach management generally includes two key components: management for providing recreational use, and management for environmental protection (James, 2000; McLachlan et al., 2013). Traditionally beach management focused on the human use of the beach and had the goal of maintaining the beach as a recreational resource (James, 2000). Recently, however, there is a need for management styles that take into account the value of beaches as a natural resource and the aim to preserve their fragile ecosystems (Botero et al., 2015; McLachlan et al., 2013). According to James (2000), it is essential that beach management practices extend beyond improving the beach only as a recreational resource for human use, and begins to also address protecting the beach as a natural resource. Beach management needs to integrate the well-being of the physical beach environment alongside human needs (Williams and Micallef, 2009). This holistic or integrated approach to beach management is taken so that decisions can be informed by all factors that are affecting the system and thus, hopefully become more sustainable (Botero et al., 2015; James, 2000; Lucrezi et al., 2016). According to Williams and Micallef (2009), beach management has three main aspects: 1) physical aspects (geology, geomorphology, waves, currents); 2) socioeconomic criteria (recreation, access, safety, landscape, health, environmental issues); and 3) biological content (flora, fauna). A management system should address several multidisciplinary elements in order to achieve environmental protection, and according to Lucrezi et al. (2016) “there is virtually no aspect of the beach environment that does not require management attention” (pg. 20). James (2000) also argues that the human uses, the ecology, and the management cannot be considered separately when trying to achieve environmental protection. For a visual representation of the beach ecosystem components and important relations for beach management, see Fig. 1 below.

2.2. Certification schemes and eco-labeling

Common strategies being adopted to manage beaches more sustainably are voluntary environmental initiatives (VEI's), such as environmental guidelines and certification schemes (Creo and Fraboni, 2011; Sarda et al., 2015). One popular tool used for beach management throughout the world is the use of beach awards and eco-labels. Within beach management, the most well-known and widely used certification scheme is Blue Flag (Ariza et al., 2008b; Lucrezi and van der Merwe, 2015; Marin et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2000; Pencarelli et al., 2016; Williams and Micallef, 2009). According to Font (2002), the first milestone in environmental certification was when a Blue Flag award was first given out to a beach. Since that time, the use of beach awards has become popular, and the various awards and quality assurance systems at beaches are widespread for promoting beach tourism (Morgan, 1999). Ariza et al. (2008b) describes the purpose of beach award schemes as a way for beach users to be able to identify the quality of the beach and use that information when deciding to visit a beach. In addition to promoting tourism, it has been suggested that beach award schemes are useful management tools that can encourage environmentally sustainable management. Beach award schemes are said to bridge the gap between recreation and conservation, and are considered to be a strategy for sustainable beach management (Nelson and Botterill, 2002). According to Williams and Micallef (2009) beach certification can be an effective tool for environmentally sound management, and the authors state that “the adoption of a rigorous beach quality evaluation scheme is an effective strategy through which improvements in beach quality

and beach user satisfaction may be achieved” (pg. 62). Creo and Fraboni (2011) discuss how coastal municipalities are using voluntary certification schemes to work towards incorporating sustainability.

2.3. Blue Flag eco-certification

Environmental Defence has operated the Blue Flag program in Ontario for over a decade now.

The Blue Flag is awarded to beaches that have met strict international standards in four different categories: water quality, environmental education, environmental management and safety and services. These standards are in the form of a list of 33 criteria that are provided to beaches wanting to be awarded the flag. The majority of these criteria are considered imperative, meaning that beaches must comply with them in order to receive and maintain Blue Flag status. There are a couple criteria that are considered guideline criteria, meaning they are not mandatory, but are strongly encouraged. These guideline criteria include promoting sustainable transportation at the beach and having a supply of drinking water available at the beach (Environmental Defence ‘Criteria for Beaches’, n.d.).

A Blue Flag is awarded annually for the beach season (Williams and Micallef, 2009). The process of applying to the program involves an application to the national jury where it is reviewed, and if approved, is then forwarded to the international jury for final review before the flag is awarded. If a beach does not yet meet all of the criteria to achieve Blue Flag but is formally working towards the process, it is considered a candidate beach. Once a beach receives a Blue Flag, it needs to continue to meet the imperative criteria for the entire beach season. Audits are conducted in order to ensure that beaches are consistently adhering to the criteria and the Flag may be withdrawn from a beach that is not meeting the required standards. These audits may be completed by a Blue Flag representative with the knowledge of the beach managers, or may be conducted by volunteers that are unknown to the beach managers. The Blue Flag is promoted by displaying a flag, leaflets, information boards and pamphlets at each awarded beach (Morgan, 1999).

According to the international Blue Flag website, the program works hard to be the leader in sustainable management of beaches (Blue Flag ‘Our History’, n.d.).

2.4. Issues and successes of Blue Flag

To date, most research on Blue Flag has focused on public awareness and economic impacts, with very little research assessing the effectiveness of Blue Flag as tool for environmental management. Although Blue Flag is the most popular eco-award and municipalities use it as a management plan, there are criticisms over the use of the award (Boevers, 2008; Lucrezi et al., 2016; Micallef and Williams, 2002; Mir-Gual et al., 2015; Zielinski and Botero, 2015). There is doubt that beach awards in general are appropriate schemes to be relied on for management of a beach. For example, Lucrezi et al. (2016) state, “while some of the components of the Blue Flag are relevant for beach management, the programme is inadequate either to guarantee beach quality or properly assist beach management” (pg. 2). Micallef and Williams (2002) stated that although there are quality awards in use, including Blue Flag, none of them successfully take into account the biological, physical and socio-economic requirements that need to be balances to effectively manage a beach.

Research conducted by Boevers (2008) questioned whether the Blue Flag criteria really are an appropriate strategy to use for true environmental beach protection. After conducting a literature review on the Blue Flag award, Boevers (2008) stated that “the

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