Towards Blue Flag status: Current conservation-related plans and recommendations for Eastern Beach in East London, South Africa, by public and private stakeholders

Mr Headman Sayedwa
Department of Applied Management, School of Public and Operations Management,
University of South Africa
63561557@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Dr Dorothy Queiros
Department of Applied Management, School of Public and Operations Management,
University of South Africa
queirdr@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

The Blue Flag award has become a prevalent tool for beach management worldwide. It applies environmental law and focuses on sustainable management of urban beaches. The literature reveals that Blue Flag beaches grant visitors' assurance of compliance with approved international standards of safety, quality and acceptable user regulations. South Africa was accorded accreditation rights 20 years ago, to pursue this status as a sustainable ecological approach. Yet, a research gap exists with fragmented environmental legislation and policies, which continue to afflict certain regions, such as Eastern Beach in the Eastern Cape. The intensity of negative environmental impacts has caused deterioration of coastal conditions, fuelled by open sewage disposal, illegal littering and lack of environmental compliance. This has complicated conservation efforts and reached a critical stage, requiring urgent attention to eco-friendly and optimal management plans. This paper therefore aims to determine current conservation-related plans and recommendations to move Eastern Beach towards Blue Flag status. This empirical research followed a qualitative approach via virtual semi-structured interviews with twenty participants, who were tourism public and private stakeholders. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. Findings reveal that organisations are involved in planning and management of land activities to achieve Blue Flag status and are promoting environmental awareness amongst the public. The majority of participants felt that the status would improve the quality of the water, beach-front and environmental education and training. Current conservation-related plans include infrastructural development, such as sewage pipe replacement and environmental cleaning campaigns. Participants highlighted the need for enhanced collaboration on conservation initiatives; management of pollution and land activities; and public awareness and voluntary conservation initiatives. A proper needs analysis and the creation of environmental guidelines were also recommended. Findings provide guidance to stakeholders towards attaining the status, which can have positive socio-economic and ecological impacts on Eastern Beach and its surroundings.

Key terms: *Blue Flag award, sustainable improvement strategy, coastal tourism, perceptions, public and private stakeholders.*

1. Introduction

Blue Flag is a leading eco-label (Arulappan, 2016; Foundation for Environmental Education, 2006) dating back to the 1980s (FEE, 2006; WCED, 1987). This internationally prominent eco-label applies environmental law (Coetzee, 2016) and focuses on the sustainable ecological management of urban beaches, marinas and boating tourism operators (Klein & Dodds, 2017; World Commission on Environment & Development, 1987). Having this label improves tourism revenue (Pencarelli, Splendiani & Fraboni, 2016), with these beaches becoming assets for locals and visitors alike (Buckley, 2002 & Font, 2002; Tudor & William, 2003). Recently, several countries (both developing and developed) have adopted it as a strategy to bridge the gap between recreation and conservation (Lucrezi, Saayman & Van der Merwe, 2016; Slatter & Mearns, 2018). South Africa (SA) become the first country outside the European continent to be accorded Blue Flag accreditation rights for its beaches in 2001 (Blue Flag South Africa, 2020; Wildlife & Environment Society of South Africa, 2019).

While SA has a total of 45 Blue Flag accredited beaches, the Eastern Cape Province contains only six of these (BFSA, 2020, WESSA, 2019). Yet, the province's coastline is rich with natural coastal biodiversity and outstanding natural beauty (Acheampong, 2015; Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, 2018). The inadequate conditions of non-Blue Flag beaches, among them Eastern Beach in East London, calls for urgent attention to coastal development and coastal zone management practices (Du Preez & Hosking, 2011; Silwana, 2015). At Eastern Beach, negative environmental impacts have caused deterioration of the beach, fuelled by open sewage disposal, littering and lack of ecological compliance (Coastal Environmental Services, 2005; Operation Phakisa, 2014). The unranked status of this beach has hampered conservation-related efforts from both stakeholders and the general public (Hall, 2010). Without Blue Flag, there is a lack of incentive to manage this natural resource to comply with the Bathing Water Directive plan (WESSA, 2019) and promote sustainability (Ferreira & Perks, 2016; Keyser, 2006).

In addition to the environmental challenges at Eastern Beach, fragmented environmental legislation and policies continue to afflict the region, with wide-ranging barriers to the attainment of Blue Flag status in Eastern Cape's beaches (Klein & Dodds, 2017; Lucrezi *et al.,* 2016;Silwana, 2015). In spite of efforts by national government, the results of exclusion still occur, with disjointed ecological regulations and policies that have failed to promote the attainment of the Blue Flag status at Eastern Beach. To date, most research on beaches and the Blue Flag eco-label has concentrated on the public's views regarding ranked beaches and the financial impact of the eco-label in South Africa (Klein & Dodds, 2017; Lucrezi *et al.,* 2016; Slatter & Mearns, 2018). Very little research exists to investigate beach management, with a focus on Blue Flag Beaches in South Africa (Silwana, 2015). There is also no evidence of existing studies relating to stakeholder roles, plans and recommendations towards the attainment of the Blue Flag status on East London's beaches (Silwana, 2015; Slatter & Mearns, 2018).

With the abovementioned research problems in mind, this paper aims to determine the current conservation-related plans and recommendations to move Eastern Beach towards Blue Flag status, from the perspective of public and private tourism stakeholders.

2. Literature review

Blue Flag ecolabel: A sustainable ecological approach in South Africa

In a resource-based industry such as tourism, it is essential that there is a balance between tourism development and destination protection (Pencarelli *et al.,* 2016; Veiga, Santos, Águas & Santos, 2018; Zielinkski & Botero, 2015). Hence sustainable tourism is not only considered as a recent market segment, which aligns with green tourism (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2017), but as a sensitive guideline that operationalises practical sustainability goals (Liu, 2003; Ninerola, Sanchez-Rebull & Hernandez-Lara, 2019). Consequently, beach tourism in South Africa is directly framed around sustainable standards of seashores, with the intention to promote and enhance tourism(DEA, 2012; Lucrezi *et al.,* 2016; NDT, 2016). It is within the same context of sustainability that beach maintenance, upgrade and certification is viewed as an environmental investment that can generate economic returns for tourist destinations (Du Preez *et al*., 2011). The literature positions the Blue Flag Eco-label as a sensitive beach management tool, which reinforces environmental sustainability in the country (BFSA, 2020; Klein & Dodds, 2017; WESSA, 2019).

South Africa adopted this eco-label to utilise it as a sustainable approach , which ensures that local beaches can be promoted for their sustainable management, international standard of cleanliness, safety and environmental responsiveness (BFSA, 2020; NDT, 2016). Subsequently, statutory efforts surrounding ecological sustainability were reinforced nationally, through the Bill of Rights, Acts, Agenda 21, industry policies and strategies (Slatter & Mearns, 2018). The *National Environmental Management Act 107 of 1998*, *Integrated Coastal Management Act 24 of 2008* and National Tourism Sector Strategy of 2011 were also implemented, to strengthen sustainable development and management of the country's beaches (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2014; South Africa, 2016). The Blue Flag criteria provide guidelines regarding obtaining the award as well as the related administrative processes. A successful award requires a collaborative partnership between the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA), the Department

of Environmental Affairs (DEA), the National Department of Tourism (NDT) and participating public and private stakeholders (BFSA, 2013; NDT, 2016; Slatter & Mearns, 2018). The benefits associated with Blue Flag status for Eastern Beach in particular are, at present, missed opportunities from an economic, social and environmental perspective.

3. Research design and methodology

This research was qualitative in nature and focused on the participants views, perceptions, meanings, knowledge and experiences (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2005; Heaton, 2004). The research was situated in the paradigm of constructivism, which accepts that individuals will have multiple subjective interpretations of their world (Creswell, 2014) and that the research findings emerge though the interaction between the researcher and the participants (Bann, 2001). The researcher used empirical research, involving virtual semi-structured interviews.

Sampling technique, sample size, inclusion criteria, participants and ethical considerations

The participants were public and private stakeholder groups, who hold management roles within their organisations. These participants are directly involved in tourism planning, coastal development and the environmental management of coastal tourist attractions in East London. The survey population of active tourism stakeholders in East London is approximately 52 (Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality, 2018). A purposive sampling technique was used, which involves finding and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Using this sampling technique, the researcher could ensure the validity and reliability of the information gathered (Palys, 2008). The inclusion criteria were that participants needed to be between the ages of 18 and 65) and be employed as a public or private tourism stakeholder in East London. The final sample consisted of twenty participants, who each providing informed consent before the interview commenced. Anonymity of participants was assured. Before commencement of the fieldwork, ethical clearance was obtained from the Department of Applied Management at the University of South Africa.

Research instrument

Primary data collection was done via virtual semi-structured interviews, based on an interview guide. The questions were developed by the researcher and were informed by literature. Through this method, new knowledge was discovered, and participants' views were recorded and captured in a more open manner, as compared to quantitative methods (Creswell, 2009). The use of virtual semi-structured interviews as a data collection method derived from the philosophy that public and private tourism stakeholders' perspectives were noteworthy, beneficial, comprehensible and that they could positively affect this research, by producing rich and detailed data (Mason, 2002). The virtual nature of interviews was triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The restrictions imposed compelled researchers to utilise virtual communication tools and provided an opportunity to grow knowledge and understanding regarding using information technology effectively in fieldwork (Sah, Singh & Sa, 2020). Sedgwick and Spiers (2009:10) emphasise virtual semi-structured interviewing as the most viable, reliable and cost-effective alternative to face-to-face in-depth interviewing, to overcome geographical barriers and time constraints. Microsoft Teams (MS) was utilised to this end, with each interview being recorded with the consent of the participant.

Data analysis

To organise and manage data for analysis, the researcher utilised a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (QAQDAS), Atlas.ti – version 9.0.18. The use of ATLAS.ti allowed transcribed text to be linked back to original recordings, codes, sub-codes and comment writing (Gibbs, 2014; Queiros & Mearns, 2019). The recorded interviews were transcribed into word documents and then coded with codes and sub-codes developed by the researcher based on the themes emerging from the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). This thematic analysis is much more than simply summarising the data, it also interprets and makes sense of it (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher also performed data cleaning and determined what explanations arose from the data analysis and whether they could be triangulated by other data.

4. Findings and discussion

The findings are divided into five sections, namely organisation's involvement towards Blue Flag status; stakeholder perceptions on what Blue Flag status can do for beach quality; current conservation-related plans towards Blue Flag status; recommendations for Eastern Beach; and stakeholder awareness of voluntary environmental public initiatives currently underway. These findings are interpreted below, where quotations (which form the data in qualitative studies) are used to substantiate codes and key themes. Quotations are cited according to the participant number and the line within the transcript where the quote comes from. For example, "P9:54" refers to Participant 9, line 54. Where relevant, findings are also compared with those of previous studies.

a) Organisation's involvement towards Blue Flag status

Findings reveal that participants were aware that their organisations are involved in **planning and management** of land activities, to achieve the status at Eastern Beach. Quotations from participants demonstrate planning and management that is already aiming towards this eco-label, for example:

> *"…our organisation is part of planning in the municipality, to inform the municipality in terms of what … needs to be done there …"* (P9:45).
>
> *"… we're within the private sector space, so we spend a lot of time working with the public sector and Tourism Committee in Buffalo City, certainly in planning and management of tourism related projects …"* (P17:50).

Similarly, participants expressed that their organisations facilitate discussions on and strategies for **environmental management activities**, which are aimed at obtaining Blue Flag status [*"…as a role player to facilitate dialogue on conservation and engagement, we spend time thinking and planning … and how various land activities need to be managed in order to achieve and maintain that Blue Flag status"* (P4:87); "*… from the recreation, environmental management and engineering point of view, we're more involved*" (P21:09); and *"… we are more concerned about the environmental management for things like Blue Flag …"* (P9:39)]. It arose from the findings that host communities are not excluded from this: *"… as a stakeholder with private interest, we include communities … so that they … see Blue Flag status as an environmental requirement …"* (P9:53). Participants alluded that their organisations are involved at Eastern Beach because of their substantial focus on the **promotion of environmental awareness** activities with the public for example: *"… we are involved to get communities of the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality (BCMM) on board, in terms of making public environmental awareness …"* (P6:95); and *"Our involvement would be in the form of making the public environmentally aware of what can and can't be done because of the Blue Flag …"* (P15:51).

b) Stakeholder perceptions on what Blue Flag can do for beach quality.

The majority of participants (19/20) felt that having Blue Flag status can improve beach quality. Participants made reference to pertinent aspects such as water quality, beach-front quality, environmental education and training. Participants believe that **water quality** would certainly improve and be better maintained, as evidenced in the following quotations:

> *"… it's a good tool that we could use to try and improve quality of the beach"* (P4:100).
>
> "*… that can only help improve the beach water …* " (P17:55).
>
> "*To say, Eastern Beach has Blue status or is accredited, you can rest assured that you are going to get good water*" (P14:56).
>
> "*… the water quality can be better and maintained*" (P8:43).

It is significant that participants also perceived that the status would positively improve **beach-front quality** [*"… surely to improve the entire beach-front, so if we could get Blue Flag Status, that would be phenomenal"* (P17:55); *"I believe so because if you are a tourist or visitor, you want to get the best quality of what you are visiting"* (P14:47) and "*… a Blue Flag status means that beach is excellent"* (P8:43)]. The results indicated that the natural environment would improve, should the status be attained, for example: "*… then the aesthetics of the area will then improve as well, due to the status"* (P3:166). Participants perceived that people would be **better educated and trained** on

conservation and environmental management matters: ["*I'm pretty sure that education by having a Blue Flag means … beachgoers and visitors will be educated from an environmental perspective"* (P7:59); "*Blue Flag would help the people to become more aware of the environment"* (P13:41) and "*Yes … even if it just creates awareness of the environmental conservation to people … that would be great*" (P13:54)]. The FEE (2006) supports this view and notes that Blue Flag status seeks to balance the demands of development and conservation of natural resources, assisting coastal area stakeholders in achieving this goal.

c) Current conservation-related plans towards Blue Flag status

Participants elaborated on the **infrastructural development** that is underway and aligned it to Blue Flag status for Eastern Beach. Findings illustrate that participants were knowledgeable about the current beach-front integrated recreational park, which is under development, for example:

> *"… we're developing an 87-million-rand facility, which is an integrated urban park in the precinct that will include Eastern Beach upgrade for something like Blue Flag"* (P3:164).
>
> *"… we're focusing on infrastructure development now, which is basically creating a recreational park"* (P11:53).
>
> *"… the municipality invested millions of monies on the environmental upgrade, to uplift the beachfront"* (P15:35).
>
> "*There is construction work that is underway at the beachfront and I also understand that they are putting it as a priority with plans to upgrade the environment of Ebuhlanti and Eastern Beach*" (P15:53).

Findings portrayed the Blue Flag award as a way to balance the natural environment and man-made attractions along Eastern Beach, for example: *"… in terms of future plans and current plans, this development is to make sure that man-made attractions compliment the natural environment in terms of the Blue Flag beach"* (D10:36). A beach may be eligible for Blue Flag accreditation if it has the necessary beach facilities and services to comply with the Blue Flag criteria (BFSA, 2020; FEE, 2006).

Participants also elaborated on significant **environmental cleaning campaigns** as management interventions towards Blue Flag status [*"The Border Kei Chamber Call To Action (BKCCA), with the municipality, is working on keeping that area clean as well"* (P16:58) and *"…Buffalo City is always engaging in environmental cleaning campaigns and this is also regulated by some of the other political parties …"* (P21:44)]. One participant deliberated on the sewage-pipe replacement project, that would improve water quality for Blue Flag status:

> "*… they are building and replacing an old sewage pipeline that used to run past Eastern Beach. They're now replacing it with a new pipeline that might help with the water quality"* (P2:115).

These findings correspond with conservation related guidelines concerning Blue Flag beaches, where authorities or beach managers should ensure that the beach complies with the national guidelines or legislation concerning litter and waste management (Blue Flag South Africa, 2019, NEMA 107 of 1998, Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa, 2016).

d) Recommendations for Eastern Beach

Stakeholder engagement emerged as a recommendation from the majority of participants, highlighting a need for better collaboration on conservation related plans and to enable proper analysis of what needs to be done at this beach ["*… my recommendation would be the engagement of stakeholders for a proper analysis of what needs to be done there* (P9:52); *"I think public and private need to come together … there needs to be collaboration on environmental management …"* (P2:137); and *"… to keep that standard up through public participation, there can be engagements for environmental campaigns at this beach"* (P18:65)]. Such findings confirm the importance of consensus and stakeholder engagement in an integrated coastal zone project such as this, to achieve sustainability (Coetzee, 2016; Koutrakis *et al.*, 2010).

Engagement was also associated with **environmental awareness and education**, for example: *"I think of engagement as a huge educational campaign … it is necessary to just get everybody on board, on the same page for Blue Flag"* (P16:62). Participants conversed about **management of**

pollution and land activities, indicating that it is decisive for conservation and recommended better control of litter and waste, as elaborated on in the following quotations:

> *"… what needs to change for the Blue Flag, for me, is definitely pollution control …*" (P4:93).
>
> *"… one of the things I recommend is management of litter, by educating people at schools about taking care of the environment and avoid littering "* (P16:61).
>
> *"… Eastern Beach needs general cleaning, because it is the negative externalities that prevent us from getting a Blue Flag status, like broken bottles …*" (P12:57).

The findings illustrate that people could volunteer to police littering, for example: *"we need to have people who can volunteer there, to ensure that public isn't throwing things on the sand and breaking glass"* (P17:60). Furthermore, the need emerged for **environmental guidelines and public awareness,** as evidenced in the following quotations:

> *"I recommend that BCMM takes responsibility to manage and create awareness, it's also their responsibility to keep the environment clean"* (P4:101).
>
> *"… the public needs to be educated in terms of keeping the environment clean and maintaining it, because a lot depends on the type of maintenance and cleanliness, which is very important for Blue Flag status"* (P21:43).
>
> *"… an environmental awareness campaign is key. It encourages people then to participate and keep the place, you know, neat … tidy and clean"* (P18:57-58).

The importance of the management of the built and natural environment also surfaced, for example:

> *"I think those in leadership must look at better environmental management and preserve tourism resources at Eastern Beach "* (P6:104).
>
> *"I think they need to probably use or buy the existing land around the beach to develop"* (P21:47).
>
> *"…my recommendation maybe would the funding to be able to maintain land resources being built for Blue Flag at Eastern Beach"* (P18:60).

The above findings support the conservation related guidelines of Section 24 of the Constitution, on the rights of every citizen and management of coastal resources ("to have the environment protected … prevent pollution and ecological degradation; promote conservation; and secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources …") (NEM Act, 107 of 1998).

Finally, one participant touched on the political-will for proper management of public spaces near the beach, like Marina Glen Public Park/Ebuhlanti: *"… because of the complexity around Ebuhlanti, … nobody has got that political will to make a decision to close off that space, rehabilitate the dunes towards the east, rehabilitate the river and provide resources for that Blue Flag"* (P3:147).

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to determine current conservation-related plans and recommendations to move Eastern Beach towards Blue Flag status. It first highlighted several research problems involving Eastern Beach, namely negative impacts on the environment which have caused deterioration of the coastline; fragmented environmental legislation and policies that plague the Eastern Cape; and a dearth of research on stakeholder roles, plans and recommendations towards attaining Blue Flag status on East London's beaches. Through virtual semi-structured interviews, public and private stakeholders were questioned in an attempt to contribute to these research gaps. Via thematic analysis several findings emerged.

The findings demonstrate that public and private stakeholder organisations form part of planning for projects and management of land activities, with a view to achieving Blue Flag status at Eastern Beach. These organisations involve communities and focus on promoting environmental awareness at this beach. This paper revealed that most stakeholders perceived that achieving Blue Flag status would positively improve the quality of the water. The fact that BCMM is currently building and replacing an old sewage pipeline will also contribute significantly to this. Participants also noted that the quality of the beachfront would improve. Furthermore, the public would be better educated and trained regarding conservation and environmental management matters at this beach. Stakeholders

elaborated on the infrastructural development that is underway and aligned it to current plans for the status. Participants referred to an 87-million-rand facility being developed as part of the current plans for Eastern Beach, to balance the natural attraction (the beach) and man-made attractions (integrated urban park and beach facilities). Participants also mentioned significant environmental cleaning campaigns as current management interventions towards Blue Flag status at this beach. The need for stakeholder engagement was emphasised by the majority of participants, highlighting a need for better collaboration on conservation related plans and to enable proper analysis of what needs to be done at this beach. Participants highlighted that engagement would also improve the management of pollution and minimise littering, both of these being essential to achieving Blue Flag status. Stakeholders expressed that the public could volunteer to keep the beach clean and avoid littering, while the municipality focuses on creating environmental guidelines and fostering public awareness. In spite of current interventions, the research revealed a clear need for better environmental management and preservation of tourism resources at Eastern Beach.

This research has contributed to knowledge regarding the attainment of Blue Flag status at Eastern beach in the Eastern Cape. While it has confirmed that several negative impacts do indeed prevail on this coastline, the current plans and recommendations of public and private stakeholders reveal a will and intent to address these and move towards Blue Flag status. Moving forward, the findings of this research can provide guidance to stakeholders – providing a holistic picture of the different initiatives underway by different stakeholders, highlighting common ground, and most importantly, revealing the intent that prevails amongst stakeholders to improve Eastern Beach. Attainment of Blue Flag status would be a victory for the impoverished Eastern Cape and serve as an example that, in spite of challenges, the environment can be conserved, and high-quality beaches can be made available to locals and tourists to enjoy. The positive socio-economic and ecological spin-offs would be well worth the effort.

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7. Disclosure statement

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