



Ontario's Blue Flag beach certification – is it an effective environmental management tool?

What is the issue?

In Ontario, beaches are vital to both economic benefit as well as environmental protection. Blue Flag, a beach certification has become well known as a beach management tool and is the most well-known and widely used beach award in the world. It aims to ensure that a beach can be promoted for its sustainable management, cleanliness and safety. This study examines whether the Blue Flag certification in Ontario was being operated as an environmental management tool to benefit tourism and recreation or as management tool for environmental protection.

What did the researcher do?

The researchers conducted twenty-two interviews with beach managers in Ontario in 2016 to determine the effectiveness of Blue Flag certification. Interviewees were beach managers who had in-depth knowledge about their beach management issues, environmental protection successes, and their motivations and hindrances to receive a Blue Flag. Questions pertained to the process of obtaining certification and its effectiveness.

Why is this research useful?

Although many studies have suggested that beach certification schemes can be used as a management tool, this study is the first to focus on the effectiveness of Blue Flag environmental management. This study is also the first study to identify the key issues with the Blue Flag program in Ontario that are preventing it from being more useful to beach managers.

What were the outcomes?

A number of key findings came from this research:

- 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.
- The balance of managing for beach recreation and for a long-term healthy beach ecosystem needs improvement.
- Smaller municipalities may gain greater benefit from Blue Flag certification.
- There is confusion over the beach committee requirement of Blue Flag, and it is not playing a key role in encouraging sustainability at most of the Blue Flag beaches in Ontario.
- There is inconsistency with the reporting of water quality within the Blue Flag program.
- The certification is being used as a communication tool for beach managers to help convey their management decisions to the public and to municipal councillors.

About the Researcher

Laura Klein finished her Masters in Environmental Science and Management at Ryerson University under the supervision of Rachel Dodds, a professor at the Ted Rogers School of Hospitality and Tourism Management.

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