



Tourism Certification, National Standards and Biodiversity Conservation, South Africa

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Short title: Blue Flag certification for beach quality, South Africa

Key Message: The introduction of a Blue Flag certificate for coastal areas in South Africa has found a sustainable way to improve tourism providing better controls over water pollution, improving water quality monitoring and as well ensuring the safety of tourists on beaches.

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Picture 1: A Blue Flag certified Beach
Courtesy: Alison Kelly



Picture 2: A general picture of the economy
around the beach
Courtesy: Alison Kelly

1. What is the problem?

South Africa is a country of incredible biodiversity. It boasts over 1000 protected areas, including national parks, private reserves, World Heritage Sites, RAMSAR sites and marine protected areas. South Africa is the only country in the world to have an entire plant kingdom within its national confines- the Cape Floral Kingdom, and also contain one third of the world's succulent plant

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species (DEAT, 1997, 1999, 2000). Nature-based tourism is an important part of the national tourism industry. Between 2000 and 2001, there were an estimated 4.6 million domestic and international tourism arrivals in South Africa, generating an income of approximately US\$2.3 billion (Scholes and Biggs, 2004).

Tourism infrastructure and tours located within natural areas have both positive and negative impacts on biodiversity. On the positive side, they can generate revenue that can be ploughed back into conservation, environmental education, employment for local people, and opportunities for local businesses to supply products and services. Whereas on the negative side, these tourism activities may disturb or destroy flora and fauna, may lead to pollution and erosion, or may use water and other natural resources unsustainably.

The lack of regulation of the tourism industry in natural areas, and its use of natural resources poses a threat to biodiversity. If tourism development leads to deterioration of the environment where it operates, not only is there a threat to biodiversity and natural resource-based livelihoods, but also to the ecosystem service of the tourism activity itself. Achieving sustainability in nature-based tourism is about ensuring that resources are conserved for the benefit of future generations.

Tourism certification in South Africa

The general aim of certification is to foster responsible environmental, social and cultural behaviour and provide a quality product to consumers. Certification provides a mechanism through which enterprises can achieve voluntary standards of performance that meet or exceed baseline standards or legislation (Dodds and Joppe, 2005).

In South Africa there are seven tourism certification programs operating as private companies, or non-governmental organisations: Audubon Green Leaf, Baobab, Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa, Green Leaf Environmental Standard, Green Stay SA, Green Wilderness, and Heritage Environmental Programme. These certification programs provide services to the private sector, and predominately to accommodation enterprises. Each of these programs have different criteria that must be met in order for a tourism enterprise to be certified. Some are more heavily focused on environmental issues, while for others socio-economic factors dominate. So far, these programs have certified less than 150 tourism businesses, which is a tiny proportion of the thousands operating in the country. Also, some tourism enterprises are certified by more than one body, in order to cover the triple bottom line of sustainability: environmental, social and economic factors (Spenceley et al, 2009). Considering coastal tourism assets, such as beaches and marinas, a further certification programme called Blue Flag is also operational in South Africa, and is discussed in further detail below.

2. What ecosystem services are considered, and how?

In this case study, nature-based tourism is the primary ecosystem service considered. Many other ecosystem services are provided by the areas where nature-based tourism takes place. These include provisioning services such as wild foods, game, water; regulating services including carbon sequestration and climate regulation, purification of water and air; supporting services such as nutrient dispersal and cycling, seed dispersal and primary production; and cultural services including intellectual and spiritual inspiration, recreational experiences and opportunities for scientific discovery. The ecosystem services that are generally included in tourism certification programs include water, pollution, primary production, cultural services and recreational experiences.

3. What input was required?

3.1 Responsible tourism policies and standards

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South Africa has a firm policy basis for sustainable tourism, the 1996 White Paper on Tourism Development and Promotion called for the development of a responsible tourism industry, and laid out a series of environmental, social and economic principles (DEAT, 1996). In 2002, a national consultation process led to the emergence of National Responsible Tourism Guidelines, and an accompanying technical manual (DEAT, 2002; Spenceley et al, 2002). These were launched in the run up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which was held in Johannesburg.

More recently, the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism Grading Council of South Africa commissioned the development of National Responsible Tourism Minimum Standards for tourism enterprises, and a National Accreditation process for the endorsement of responsible tourism certification and rating organizations. It was envisaged that these standards would further the delivery of the principles of responsible tourism set out in the 1996 White Paper, and also the implementation of the 2002 guidelines (Spenceley et al, 2009).

This national process has been cognisant of an international initiative of the Tourism Sustainability Council, by ensuring that the standards are aligned with the Global Criteria for Sustainable Tourism. These 37 criteria were developed by analysing 4,500 criteria and after comments from over 1000 stakeholders. They are grouped within four main themes of effective sustainability planning, maximizing social and economic benefits to the local community, reduction of negative impacts to cultural heritage, and reduction of negative impacts to environmental heritage (Dodson and DiElsi, 2008).

3.2 Blue flag certification for coastal areas

Blue Flag is a certification program targeted at local authorities, the public and the tourism industry in coastal areas. A blue flag is awarded annually to beaches and marinas that meet certain environmental, amenity and safety criteria. The Blue Flag is widely recognized and assures recreational users of a quality visit to the beach. Blue Flag locations can use the award scheme to attract local tourists and recreational users to the area (Cumbterbatch, 2005). The award of a South African Blue Flag beach is based on compliance with 14 criteria covering management, water quality, safety, information and education (Blue Flag, undated a).

To implement the Blue Flag Campaign in a country, the member organization (the Wildlife and Environment Society (WESSA), in the case of South Africa) need to organize a workshop, establish a national committee, and carry out a feasibility phase (Blue Flag, undated b). Once this process has been successfully completed, the member organization coordinates the national process for Blue Flag. Implementation takes place at the local level, after beaches and marinas apply for Blue Flag status. When local authorities apply for the Blue Flag they pay a non-refundable application fee to WESSA. Beaches go through a one-year pilot phase where they undertake regular water quality monitoring and upgrade their facilities (e.g. such as introducing disabled access ablution facilities). During this phase WESSA work closely with the local authority to ensure that the authority's application for full status will lead to accreditation. WESSA undertake unannounced site visits and audit the Blue Flag criteria at the beach at the end of the pilot phase. A national jury of coastal management and tourism stakeholders convenes annually to review the information collected. Subsequently their findings are presented to an international jury for consideration, in order to ensure that the Blue Flag is being applied consistently (Pers. com. A. Kelly, 2005, cited in Spenceley 2005). Blue Flags are awarded one season at a time, and if any of the imperative criteria are not fulfilled during the season or the conditions change, the Blue Flag is withdrawn.

In South Africa, there are currently 31 Blue Flag beaches (www.blueflag.org).



4. What was the policy uptake, and what were the conditions for this effort to influence public management?

The standards and accreditation framework were recently finalised, and therefore it will now be the responsibility of government to raise awareness of the standards and accreditation plan nationally. A new National Department of Tourism has a specific unit in charge of responsible tourism. This unit will lead the process of implementation. Their effectiveness will depend on the uptake by protected areas and the private sector, and will need to be evaluated using appropriate monitoring and evaluation.

Blue Flag has been taken up by many of the local authorities working at coastal destinations in South Africa. This is particularly true where beaches are one of the key recreational ecosystem services used by domestic and international visitors. The uptake of Blue Flag has influenced public management to provide better controls over water pollution, and also to improve water quality monitoring and safety on beaches.

Further information:

- National Responsible Tourism Minimum Standards and National Accreditation process: www.tourism.gov.za
- Blue Flag: www.blueflag.org
- Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria: www.SustainableTourismCriteria.org.

Or on any of these issues, you are welcome to contact the author Dr Anna Spenceley on annaspenceley@gmail.com for further information

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