

(ID 238)**Sustainable Coastal-Based Tourism in Southern Sri Lanka: Assessing the Potentials of Blue Flag Certification's Criteria****Thirukeswaran, S.*, Jayawardena, N.K.R.N.***National Aquatic Resources Research and Development Agency, Colombo 15, Sri Lanka***shynuga.thirukeswaran@mespom.eu***Abstract**

As an Island nation, Sri Lanka depends on coastal ecosystems to develop its economy by enhancing coastal-based tourism activities. Sri Lanka's beaches are an essential part of coastal tourism as they attract many local and foreign tourists. With the ever-increasing demand for coastal tourism-based development, the beaches in Sri Lanka are susceptible to environmental degradation and pollution. The Blue Flag Certification (BFC), recognized globally for its stringent environmental standards, serves as a potential framework for promoting coastal tourism while ensuring the conservation of coastal ecosystems. The BFC requires any beach to achieve and sustain high standards in 33 criteria under the four categories: Environmental Education and Information, Water Quality, Environmental Management, and Safety and Services. Although many attractive beaches in the southern part of Sri Lanka usually receive a larger proportion of tourists annually, Sri Lanka has not obtained BFC for any of its beaches so far. Therefore, through a comprehensive assessment, including field surveys and analysis of the applicability of blue flag criteria, this study aims to gauge the feasibility and effectiveness of integrating BFC into the development of sustainable coastal-based tourism. Three beaches located in the Southern Province, namely Unawatuna, Mirissa, and Polhena were selected for this study. Observations and data gathered during the field investigations were analyzed for 30 criteria (excluding water quality criteria) using the guidelines and explanatory notes provided by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE). It was identified that Unawatuna has fully or partially achieved 13 criteria out of 30, while Mirissa and Polhena achieved only ninth and seventh criteria respectively. All three beaches have achieved most of the criteria under the environmental management category while lacking significant achievements in the safety and services category. However, all three beaches have achieved at least one criterion under the environmental education and information category. Enhanced cleanliness and aesthetic values of beaches were observed where the environmental management criteria were prioritized especially in Mirissa. This study ensures that accomplishing all BFC criteria helps to enhance the region's coastal tourism potential while continuing to preserve its unique and pristine coastal ecosystems. Further, this research also provides valuable insights and a holistic approach for policymakers, local councils, and tourism development stakeholders to implement the necessary strategies to fulfil all the criteria. Therefore, this study recommends a steady and efficient incorporation of all the criteria by relevant authorities to promote sustainable tourism and therefore contribute to economic development.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Environmental management, Blue flag, Water quality, Development