

# **MANAGERS' CONCERNS TO USE BLUE FLAG AS A MARKETING TOOL IN TOURISM INDUSTRY IN TURKEY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Eco-label is a reward that is given to the products by the third parties according to the environmental criteria. In other words, eco-label is added to harmless products for the environment. The primary goals of eco-labeling are composed of protecting the environment, encouraging the eco-friendly ideas and raising awareness among consumers about the environmental problems. Some of the examples for eco-label can be given as Green Star and Blue Flag. Blue Flag is an international eco-label that is given to the beaches, yachts and marinas. The objective of the study is to examine the usability of Blue Flag as a marketing tool. The research is conducted in tourism properties in Turkey. The data used in the study were collected from the hotel/holiday village/marinas managers in Mediterranean and Aegean Coasts. The survey questions were based on the related literature. It is concluded that although Blue Flag implications have been seen as a marketing tool, its real meaning is not understood well by the industry.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Along with the advances in the environmentalism activities, green marketing activities initially become much more important for the U.S.A. and Western Europe businesses (Rahbar and Wahid, 2011: 73). Besides, certification programs related with the sustainability takes place in the agendas of the firms. These programs force managers to develop environment friendly products to the consumers. Hereby, they both satisfy the needs and the wants of the current customers and leave the green environment to the next generations. Today, it can be seen various green marketing activities and programs. It is determined that nearly 104 eco-labeling programs have been developed for only the tourism industry, as well (Medina, 2005: 281).

The objective of this study is to examine the hotels/ holiday villages/marinas managers concerns on Blue Flag as a marketing tool. Paper firstly gives brief information about eco-labeling and Blue Flag. Secondly, data collected from hotel, holiday village and marinas' managers are analyzed and interpreted. Finally, the results, suggestions and further research are presented.

## **ECO-LABELING**

Since 1970's sustainability and environmentalism gained importance and has become an emergent issue for the countries. Academics, policymakers, community activist and government's concern to these issues have been increasing and specifically government and community

activists developing some policies and strategies to protect the environment. One of these policies is eco-label applications.

Eco-labels are “tools used to provide information to the consumers that products or services have met certain levels of environmental performance (Lee, 2001: 317).” Indeed basically eco-labeling helps consumers to differentiate the eco-friendly products from the others. From this point of view it can be clearly seen that eco-labeling helps to differentiate the products among its rivals. Furthermore, eco-label gives the guarantee of the environmental quality and technical performance of the product. For instance, “The Flower”, “Blue Angel”, “Nordic Swan” ensures that the product has a standard specification. Beyond these, eco-labels reduce informational asymmetries. Producers become much clearer to the consumers. Thus it lowers the risks of buying risky products. In brief, consumers’ uncertainties about the products can lower by eco-labeling (Schumacher, 2010: 2203-2204). However, it is possible to encounter certain challenges in eco-labeling such as inadequate informing, cost factor and requirements of efficient marketing efforts.

The tourism industry uses eco-labels for different purposes. Among the major reasons of using those are: (i) developing positive attitudes toward their products and services, (ii) having a competitive advantage, (iii) certifying the fewer effects on the environment, (iv) encouraging other entrepreneurs to attain high environmental standards, and (v) creating environment-friendly products and services. Tourism industry, tourism enterprises and tourists have some many benefits by using tourism eco-labels (Sasidharan, Sirakaya and Kerstetter, 2002: 162-164). Tourism eco-labeling process is administered by third parties. Eco-labeling process consists of six stages, which is shown in figure 1.

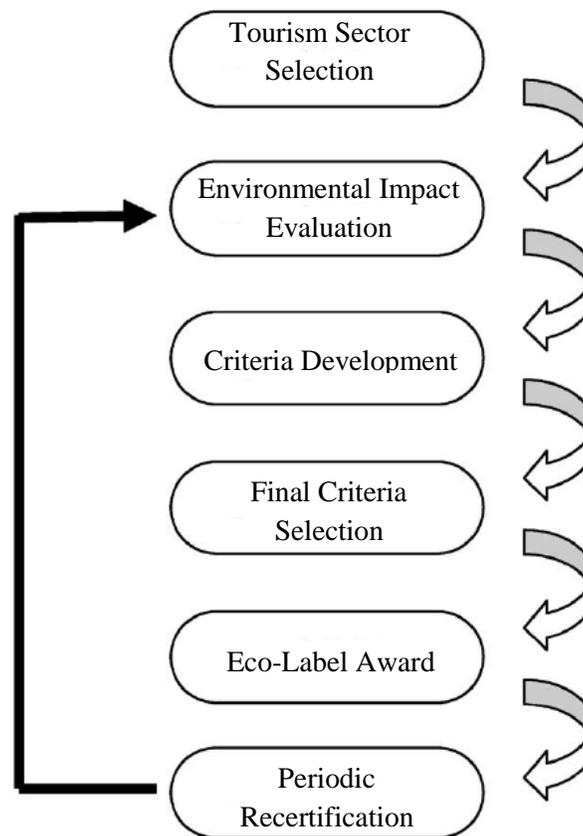


Figure 1: Tourism eco-labeling process (Sasidharan, Sirakaya and Kerstetter, 2002: 165)

First stage of the process is the tourism sector selection. This stage requires the involvement of stakeholders like tourism planners, tourism enterprises, associations, tourists, non-governmental organizations etc. In step two, potential effects of the sectors on the environment are clarified. Water, air and noise pollution, solid waste, soil erosion, energy consumption can be the possible impacts of these sectors. Hereafter, it is time to develop the criteria for minimizing the negative impacts of the sector emphasized before. In the fourth stage of the process final criteria selection is made by eco-labeling agency. After all, in the case of meeting the requirements of the eco-labeling agency; licensing fee must be paid by the tourism entrepreneur. Thus, it is deserved to take an eco-label award. Although reward is taken, process still continues. Environmental impacts identified in the second stage of the process are usually reviewed in every three years in case of some changes in the environmental impact criteria. If new criteria are recognized, entrepreneurs have to renew their certificates by applying to the eco-labeling agency (Sasidharan, Sirakaya and Kerstetter, 2002: 164-165).

European Prize for Tourism and Environment, Green Globe Award, British Airways Tourism for Tomorrow Award, European Sustainable City Award, Green Suitcase Award and Blue Flag Award are some of the examples of eco-labels and rewards (Lee, 2001: 313).

#### **ECO-LABELING OF SERVICES: THE BLUE FLAG AND TURKEY**

Blue Flag “is an international program for certifying beaches and marinas, is that no industrial pollution or sewage-related discharges may adversely impact the beach area of the tourism destination (Sasidharan, Sirakaya and Kerstetter, 2002: 167).” It is the first milestone of environmental certification developed in 1985 by a non-governmental organization in France. After a short while with the efforts of “Foundation for Environmental Education in Europe” (FEEE), it has been spread quickly. In 2000, over 1800 beaches and 600 marinas were taken this award. In 2001, it has been expanded outside Europe to South Africa and the Caribbean (Font, 2002: 198).

Blue-Flag is valid for only a single summer season. In this award system 29 criteria were determined according to the following fields (Petroman et al., 2010: 27):

- environmental management
- water quality
- security, services and facilities
- education and information related with the environmental protection

Blue Flag has been applied in countries such as Turkey, Greece, France, Spain, Portugal, etc. Turkey is in the fourth rank according to the 2012 International Blue Flag beach numbers (Figure 2a) while in the eighth rank with regard to the Blue Flag marinas (Figure 2b).

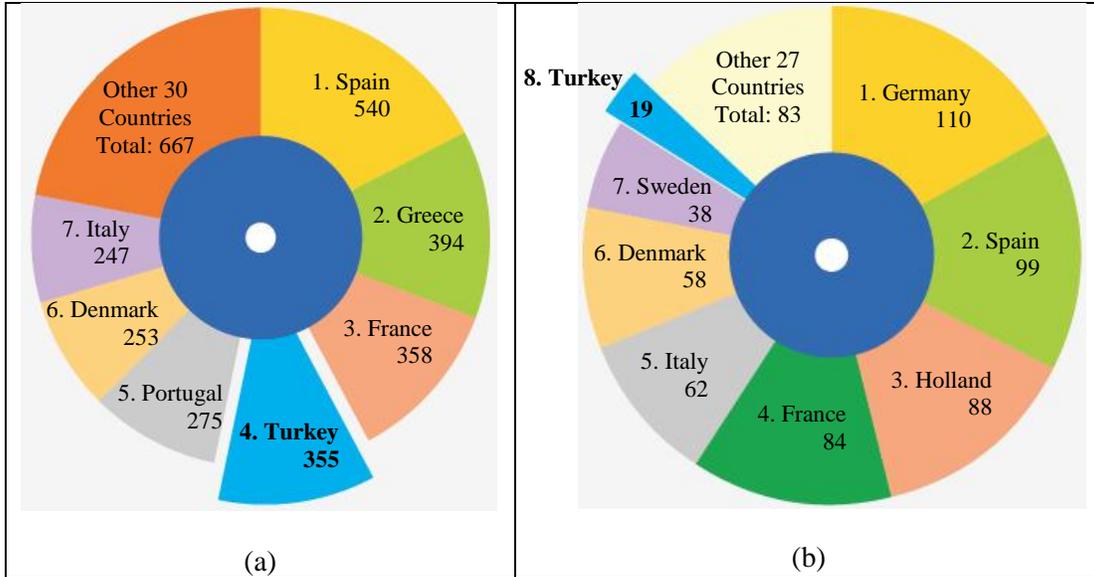


Figure 2: International Blue Flag numbers in 2012 with respect to (a) beaches and (b) marinas in the north hemisphere ([www.mavibayrak.org.tr](http://www.mavibayrak.org.tr), November 23, 2012)

In Turkey, Republic of Turkey Ministry of Tourism was pioneered in the implementation of Blue Flag program in 1993. Ever since that time, TURCEV (Foundation for Environmental Education in Turkey) which is the national FEE member of the program, is responsible for running of it ([www.mavibayrak.org.tr](http://www.mavibayrak.org.tr), November 23, 2012).

According to the statistics in 2012; 355 beaches, 19 marinas, 13 yachts have Blue Flag in Turkey (Figure 3). As can be seen from the below figure that the Blue Flag implementations generally have an increasing trend in Turkey. Figure 4 illustrates the geographic locations in Turkey which contain Blue Flag with respect to beaches, marinas or yachts.

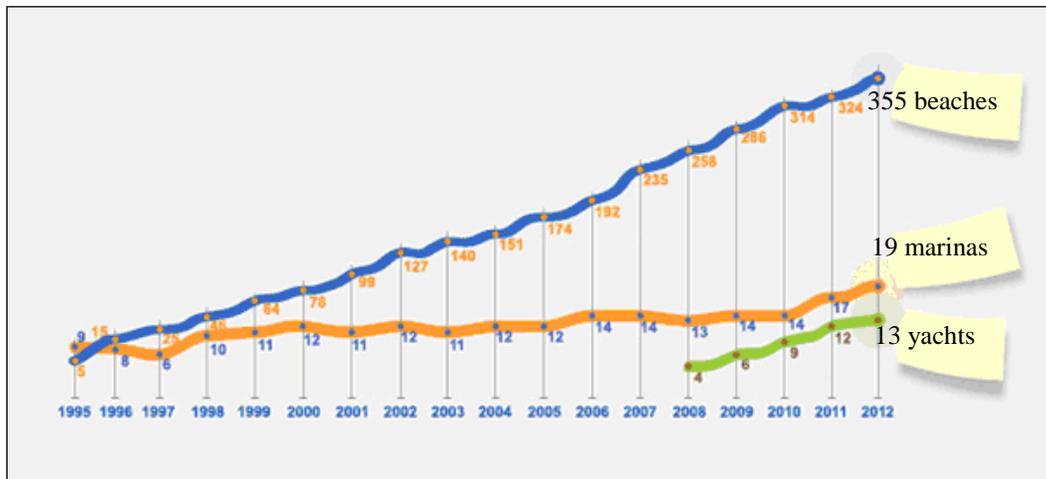


Figure 3: Numbers of Blue Flag in Turkey according to the years ([www.mavibayrak.org.tr](http://www.mavibayrak.org.tr), November 23, 2012)



Figure 4: The distribution of Blue Flag in Turkey with respect to beaches, marinas or yachts ([www.mavibayrak.org.tr](http://www.mavibayrak.org.tr), November 23, 2012)

In the light of above information, besides with the managers concern on blue flag as a marketing tool, following hypotheses will also be tested:

H1: There is a relation between the reasons to have blue flag and business type (hotel, holiday village and marinas)

H2: There is a relation between Blue Flag's influence and business type

H3: Marinas' managers concern Blue Flag as a competitive advantage more than hotel and holiday villages' managers

H4: Marinas' managers allocate blue flag cost in their marketing budget more than hotel and holiday village managers.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to accomplish the study objectives, a survey instrument is designed to measure the opinions of resort hotels, holiday villages and marinas' managers on Blue Flag as one of eco-label. Examining the literature, researchers developed a nominal scale survey instrument. Survey instrument has 9 nominal scale questions. The survey instrument distributed to the sea side hotels, holiday village and marina managers with the cooperation of TURCEV (It is a non-profit Environmental Association of Turkey) in Mediterranean and Aegean Coasts. Total of 75 questionnaires were distributed to the hotels/ holiday villages/marinas which have Blue Flag in their properties. Total of 57 surveys were returned, as 5 of the survey were incomplete, 52 survey was analyzed.

## FINDINGS

Firstly, type of business respondents was analyzed. Results showed that total of 52 business includes 22 hotels, 23 holiday villages and 7 marinas.

Table 1: Type of respondent business

Type of respondent business	n	%
Hotel	22	42,3
Holiday Village	23	44,2
Marina	7	13,5

As the survey instrument included nominal questions, firstly, the frequencies of the answers were analyzed and the results were obtained as seen Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency distribution of the answers

	n	%
<b>The reasons to have Blue Flag in the hotels/holiday villages/marinas</b>		
As it is prestigious	15	28
It is a tool to increase the sales	7	13,5
As it is asked by tour operators /travel agencies	-	-
Other (Please indicate)	30	57,7
<b>Blue Flag influence on the hotels/holiday villages/marinas</b>		
Connections with tour operator/travel agency increased	2	3,8
Marketing power increased	11	21,2
Customer attention increased	22	42,3
Other (Please specify)	17	32,6
<b>Blue Flag is a criteria asked in the reservation process</b>		
Yes	11	21,2
No	8	15,4
Sometimes	33	63,5
<b>Blue Flag is mostly asked by</b>		
Tour operators	28	53,8
Individual customers	24	46,2
<b>Blue Flag award may provide competitive advantage</b>		
Yes	28	53,8
No, it is not related to each other	1	1,9
Somewhat	23	44,2
<b>Blue Flag is the indicator of sustainable tourism</b>		
Yes	43	82,7
No	1	1,9
Partly	8	15,4
<b>Blue Flag contributes to the protection of the coasts</b>		
Yes	45	86,5
No	6	11,5
Partly	7	13,4
<b>Blue Flag differentiates us from the competitors</b>		
Yes	51	98,1
No	1	1,9
<b>Allocation of Blue Flag cost in marketing budget</b>		
Yes	32	61,5
No	20	38,5

As seen on Table 2, among the reasons to have Blue Flag, the highest percentage belongs to the “other” and when the reasons are examined, respondents mostly indicate as a first reason that they have ISO 14001 certificates related to environment policies. Other reasons are focused on customer satisfaction. In terms of Blue Flag’s influence on the tourism establishment, the highest percentage is belonging to increase of the customer attention and increase in marketing power followed this. Among the other influences, respondent mostly specified the customer trust to the hotel/holiday village

The answers given to the question if the Blue Flag is a criteria asked in the reservation process is mostly responded as “sometimes” and it is followed by “yes”. Concerning the type of customers who ask for Blue Flag results showed that the percentages of tour operators and individual customers close to each other. In terms of the competitive advantage of Blue Flag, 53,8 % of the respondents see that it has a competitive advantage while 44,2 % has partly competitive advantage. Only 1 respondent says “No, there is not any relation”. Analyses also manifested that 82,7 % of the respondent evaluates the Blue Flag as an indicator of sustainable tourism and 15,4 % of the respondents see the Blue Flag is partly indicator of sustainable tourism. When the respondents asked if Blue Flag contributes to the protection of coasts or not, 86,5 % of them think that it contributes, 13,4% of them think partly and the rest of them think it does not contribute. In addition, 98,1 % of the respondents think that Blue Flag differentiates them from the competitors. In terms of allocating of Blue Flag cost in marketing budget, while 61,5 percent of the respondents indicated that they are allocating the cost of Blue Flag in their marketing budget whereas 38,5 of them are not allocating.

In the second step of the analyses, hypotheses were tested and the results as following.

H1: There is a relation between the reasons to have blue flag and business type (hotel, holiday village and marinas) is rejected (Sig. 530,  $p \geq 0.05$ ).

H2: There is a relation between Blue Flag’s influence and business type is rejected (Sig. 424,  $p \geq 0.05$ ).

H3: Marinas’ managers concern Blue Flag as a competitive advantage more than hotel and holiday villages’ managers is rejected (Sig. 574,  $p \geq 0.05$ )

H4: Marinas’ managers allocate Blue Flag’s cost in their marketing budget more than hotel and holiday village managers is supported (Sig. 053,  $p \leq 0.05$ ).

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Studies in recent years show that eco-labeling is an important issue especially in developed countries for supporting the sustainability. Contemporarily most small and medium-sized firms try to make contribution to activities related with the sustainability. This evokes the utilization of eco-labels in some sectors such as tourism. Both tourism entrepreneurs and customers profit from eco-labeling. Blue Flag is the one of the award given by third parties to the beaches, marinas and yachts in case of ensuring the required criteria.

In the study it was found that the main reason of having a Blue Flag is the certificates related with the environmental issues. Results manifested that it is important to have a Blue Flag in order to satisfy the customers’ expectations and wants. Respondents also think that Blue Flag is the way of drawing the customer attention and enhancing the marketing power of the business. Findings are consistent with the study conducted by Nelson et al. (2000). In their study, it was stated that a

total of 72 % believed beach award flag is an important issue in the selection of a beach. Buckley (2002) expressed that Blue Flag and other eco-labels in tourism industry are considered as important subjects in environmental management and marketing in tourism. He also denoted that tour operators use it in marketing of their services. This study shows that every customer is not able to adopt exactly Blue Flag implications as it is “sometimes” asked during the reservation process. In particular, tour operators are more concerned on this award. As it was seen from the findings of the study, lodging industry managers think that Blue Flag award provide competitive advantage (53,8 %). Managers’ answer show that they are informed about sustainability and it is related with the Blue Flag award. On the other hand, it is so surprising that 24,9 % considers that Blue Flag partly contributes or doesn’t contribute to the protection of the coasts. However, they admit that Blue Flag is the way of differentiating themselves from their rivals. Therefore, most of the respondents allocate the cost of Blue Flag in their marketing budget. Considering the hypotheses, no relation is found among the business type and reasons to have Blue Flag, influence of the Blue Flag and concerning Blue Flag as a competitive advantage. However, H4 test revealed that marinas’ managers allocate Blue Flag cost in their marketing budget more than hotels/holiday villages managers. In hotels and holiday villages, customers are not interested in Blue Flag as much as marinas’ customers. As marinas’ customers spend more time and money with their yachts, they want quality water and clean environment. In order to satisfy their customers, marinas managers give importance to have Blue Flag and allocate the cost of Blue Flag in their marketing budget.

From the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that while the meaning and importance of using a Blue Flag is not understood exactly by hotel, holiday village and marinas’ managers. These managers admit the importance of using this award as a marketing tool towards the tour operators and a differentiating factor among their competitors. This shows that sustainability activities are not understood well yet. In this fact, informatory activities of public and private sectors will be helpful to explain the advantages of these eco-labeling activities.

This study examines the Blue Flag award system on the managers’ side. It will be also meaningful to conduct a study on the consumers in order to receive their opinions about Blue Flag implications. This kind of study will be helpful and enlightening in comparing the thoughts of the managers with consumers.

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