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**The Potential Role Blue Flag Status Plays in Promoting  
Sustainable Coastal Tourism, Mthunzini Beach,  
uMlalazi, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa**

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates the role of using a blue flag (BF) as a marketing tool for promoting tourism within Mthunzini Beach in South Africa. Although Blue Flags are expensive and difficult to maintain, there is limited research on whether blue flags are effective in promoting coastal areas as tourism

destinations. This is a study of the uMlalazi Local Municipality, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, home to Mthunzini Beach. Although Mthunzini Beach is environmentally sensitive, it could advance local economic growth by attracting more tourists to the region. This paper investigates the role of the Blue Flag as a marketing tool that can both protect the environment and simultaneously promote coastal tourism. Thus, this study is underpinned by the theory of ecological economics where there is a balance between being sensitive to the environment and to economic gains. Sixteen (16) semi-structured interviews were conducted with conservation managers, environmentalists, tourism officers, and the conservancy chairperson at Mthunzini Beach. Results show that the Blue Flag is recommended as an effective marketing tool that can preserve the environment and promote tourism development. However, much work needs to be done by investing in supporting infrastructure such as parking facilities, waste disposal, security, and upgrading the ablution facilities.

**Keywords:** *Blue Flag, Ecological Economics, Sustainable coastal tourism.*

## **1. Introduction**

### ***1.1. Background***

Beach certification programmes such as Blue Flags are increasingly becoming an international benchmark for sustainable coastal tourism (Zielinski and Botero, 2019). In South Africa, the maintenance of a blue flag status on beaches such as Margate in Southern KwaZulu Natal (KZN) cost between R17 and R25 million per year, and the costs are even higher when the beach loses a blue flag status (Nahman and Rigby, 2008). Mthunzini Beach is one of the few KZN beaches that do not have an eco-label, such as a Blue Flag status. If Mthunzini Beach can attain a Blue Flag status, this will imply that “effective sustainable management” is ensured and its performance on “environmental management, environmental education and information, safety and services, and water quality” is internationally acclaimed (Slater and Means, 2018:1). Cerqua (2017) found that similar criteria were included when “246 Italian beaches, located in 131 municipalities or 69 tourism areas, were awarded the Blue Flag banner” in 2012. Commenting on the availability of the Blue Flag status, Geldenhuys (2014) posits that in 2014 there were 244 beaches and 208 marinas spread through 10 countries.

In South Africa, the Blue Flag Programme was implemented in the “Western Cape, Eastern Cape, and KwaZulu Natal provinces, and the Northern Cape” is the only coastal province that is still expected to

award its beaches a Blue Flag status after 26 years of the implementation of this programme in the country (Slater and Means, 2018:1). Although other 3 provinces adopted a Blue Flag programme many years ago, beaches such as Eastern Beach in East London City in the Eastern Cape and Margate Beach in Southern KZN experienced many compliance challenges (Sayedwa and Queiros, 2022; Nahman and Rigby, 2008). Such challenges resulted in some of the beaches losing their Blue Flag status, while others were prevented from qualifying for this eco-label. There are many benefits for Mthunzini Beach to be associated with a Blue Flag, which is a tourist draw card. The views of beachgoers, beach managers, and other stakeholders are imperative to consider when deciding on granting a beach Blue Flag status (Lucrezi, Saayman, and van der Merwe, 2015). In Latvia, the Blue Flag status is used to evaluate the effectiveness and successful implementation of environmental legislation (Ulme, Graudina-Bombiza, and Ernsteins, 2018). This is equally applicable to South Africa, where a blue flag is an important yardstick for measuring water quality, sound environmental management, compliance with safety issues, and investing in environmental education and information (Saayman and Saayman, 2017; Slater and Mearns, 2018). The implementation of a Blue Flag programme is expected to contribute towards sustainable coastal tourism management and local economic development (Merino and Prats, 2020).

## ***1.2 Sustainable Coastal Tourism***

The concept of sustainable tourism development has evolved as a global political priority, with the goal of guiding future tourism in a sustainable manner (Lukoseviciute and Panagopoulos, 2021). Sultan, Sharmin, Badulescu, Stiubea, and Xue (2020) conducted a study investigating the behaviour of tourists in coastal tourism destinations such as beaches and concluded that the sustainable use of beach infrastructure remains a challenge for sustainable coastal tourism. In the context of Mthunzini Beach, sustainable coastal tourism denotes striking a balance between the beach ecosystem and the ecological scale. The anticipated adoption of the Blue Flag status by Mthunzini Beach is premised on ensuring that this destination is protected for present and future generations (Sultan et al., 2020). Preserving the sustainability of coastal tourism requires balancing economic gains with environmental and sociocultural conservation (Sultan et al., 2020). This should entail environmental protection, sustainable job creation, and economic growth while ensuring that the Blue Flag Status is maintained as a drawcard for tourist

attractions. The theoretical framework guiding this paper elaborates on this further.

The expansion of beach tourism as a strategic economic activity in coastal areas has been claimed to be strategic for tourism promotion, and thus, beaches are exploited for maximum economic profitability (Mir-Gual, Pons, Martin-Prieto, and Rodriguez-Perea, 2015). However, this is not consistent with the need for protection of coastal environments. This contradiction is most clear through the lenses of beach certification and the theory of ecological economics. This qualitative study explores the possibility of balancing the economic, social, and ecological imperatives in Mthunzini Beach located in the uMlalazi Local Municipality, KwaZulu Natal, by exploring the potential benefits of that beach gaining Blue Flag (BF) status. The paper consists of five segments introduction, literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, findings and discussions, and conclusion.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Conceptualising the Blue Flag Status***

Beach flag status certification is meant to indicate the degree to which beaches are operating in line with given standards (Zielinski and Botero, 2019). The Blue Flags (BF) made their initial appearance in 1985 on the beaches of France to mark places on the coast that not only had outstanding waters but where the environment is cared for and highly valued (Mir-Gual *et.al.*, 2015). Following this, Blue Flag gained global recognition and was successfully used as a tool for environmental protection, and, thus, having a Blue Flag a global symbol of coastal environmental protection (Klein and Dodds, 2017).

The Blue Flag status is a mechanism testifying to environmental quality and, therefore, is beneficial to beach users (Mir-Gual *et.al.*, 2015). Cerqua (2017) further defines Blue Flag as the quality label assigned based on stringent criteria, namely: environment, education, safety, and access, which are the blue flag programme pillars. Furthermore, Lucrezi and Saayman (2015) add that Blue Flag status helps to preserve features of the beach environment. Moreover, Geldenhuys and Van der Merwe (2014) posit that the Blue Flag status holds many benefits from a conservation point of view.

Zielinski and Botero (2019) report that urban beaches with a large volume of visitors require management strategies. According to Saayman and Saayman (2017), blue flag status attracts beachgoers because it

signals cleanliness and infrastructural development. Additionally, Blue Flag status is suitable and designed for the management of recreational beaches. Blue Flag status encourages the addition of facilities such as lifeguard posts, toilets, and first aid facilities. Such provisions remain an opportunity for local municipalities to improve environmental awareness, create employment opportunities, and comply with health and safety legislation.

The Blue Flag promotes the sustainable development of coastal areas through good environmental practices, fosters cooperation between tourism and its related sectors, and educates visitors, managers, and the wider public through campaigns and relevant codes of conduct (Fraguell, Martí, Rucabado, Ramis, and Jimenez, 2015). Brett (2019) supports the Blue Flag award as it signals to the public that the beach is clean, safe, and healthy. Additionally, Brett (2019:16) cautions that tourism planners should not apply a “one-size-fits-all approach” to future advances in building sustainable coastal tourism.

## ***2.2. Implementation of the Blue Flag Requirements in KZN Beaches***

### *2.2.1. The Experiences of Durban Beaches*

Notably, uMlalazi Municipal Council identifies tourism as a vehicle for economic development, improving and upgrading the beauty of the Mthunzini coastal area through the adoption of a Blue Flag status, which is anticipated to increase economic benefits. Although Mthunzini is not a big town, the Blue Flag status may transform the beach in this town, thus increasing its publicity. However, uMlalazi Municipal Council notes that the maintenance and management of environmental features of coastal systems require efficiency through the promotion of sustainable tourism (uMlalazi Local Municipality, 2021).

The management bodies of the beach and the municipality, which either have or aspire to have a blue flag, should jointly consider appropriate strategies to work towards sustainable development of the beach. Importantly, the municipality needs to be wary of any potential factors that may lead to losing its Blue Flag status, as most municipalities tend to lose their blue flag status due to pollution (Zielinski and Botero, 2019). For instance, Durban lost its Blue Flag status on many occasions due to pollution. When four of Durban’s six blue flag accredited beaches had their accreditation cancelled, it resulted in a significant financial loss for the city (McKenna, Williams, and Cooper 2011). In addition, Slater

and Means (2018) believe that South Africa's two hurdles in keeping the blue flag status are primarily the cost of implementation of the necessary factors for the Blue Flag, along with administration and maintenance costs, and the struggle of achieving the strict water quality standard.

### *2.2.2. The Experiences of Margate Beach*

A more positive example of how well tourism development can lead to major conservation gains comes from Margate Beach. With blue flag status, Margate Beach (a popular destination in KwaZulu-Natal) attracts volumes of tourists, particularly in the summer, generating as much as ZAR290 million per annum, thereby showing evidence that such practices are meaningful (Le Roux, Nahman, Pillay, Weerts, and Reyers, 2005).

The consideration of implementing a Blue Flag status requires careful consideration for decision-makers, considering the cost associated with such status (i.e., investment in infrastructure, Blue Flag status maintenance, and potential benefits from a revenue perspective). Mace, Hails, Cryle, Harlow, and Clarke (2015) call for a compilation of risk register for natural capital assets and highlight several sectors where the compilation of such a register could be of great benefit. Ekins (2003) emphasised that "river systems, coastal wetlands, and water resources are part of critical natural capital". Following the withdrawal of the Blue Flag status at Margate Beach, the accumulated loss in Margate ranged from ZAR17 million per year (Nahman and Rigby, 2008).

### ***2.3. Potential for Blue Flag Status in uMthunzini Beach***

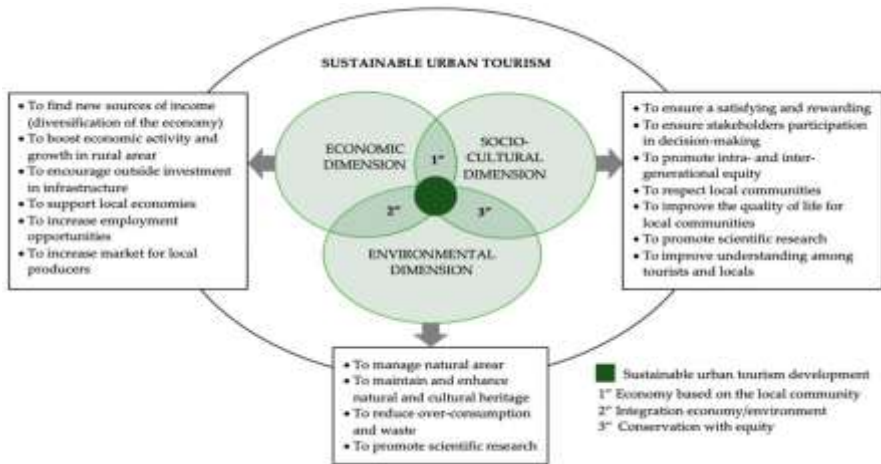
Advantageously, there are no polluting industries on the coast of Mthunzini, which is beneficial presently to uMlalazi Local Municipality, thus increasing the possibility of achieving and sustaining Blue Flag status and garnering tourism benefits within this municipality. As Okello *et al.* (2018) explain, areas with increased industrial growth, such as Richard's Bay, are vulnerable to environmental degradation, and should be highly monitored for future developments, and importantly, the protection of the environment and people must be safeguarded. Industrial growth is important as it creates income-generating opportunities for people in Richards Bay. This city is characterised by heavy and light commercial industries such as paper, fertiliser, sugar production, which collectively contribute to most of the air quality pollution in the district and particularly in Mthunzini and nearby area.

The Richards Bay Clean Air Association (RBCAA) was founded in 1997 to track pollution through a real-time monitoring network, which can analyse local air quality by measuring pollutant levels at ground level (Okello and Allan, 2015). The monitoring systems are very effective and robust, and Mthunzini was allocated a monitoring network as a reference site. It is worth noting that Mthunzini is still within the stipulated measurements and has not exceeded their National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS), and this is a good indication, particularly for people living in Mthunzini. Thus, the efforts to minimise pollution are bearing fruit. Accordingly, the light industries proposed in Mthunzini or any developments are therefore encouraged to use monitoring networks to monitor pollution (Okello, Camminga, Okello, and Zunckel, 2018).

### **3. Theoretical Framework: Ecological Economics**

One of the main drivers of economic development is tourism, but achieving sustainable coastal development is also premised on understanding and adopting some ecological economics (EE) concepts. Ecological economics has a clear normative goal, which is to achieve sustainability, where sustainability is understood to have environmental, economic, and social components. It highlights the importance of protecting the environment to ensure that future generations can also have a good quality of life. Within the EE debate is the issue of whether a sustainable economy is compatible with modern capitalist structures, and this is an important debate that may help in designing strategies for non-growing societies that are also useful to understand development (Spash, 2020).

Olale, Odote, and Kibugi (2020) iterate that coastal tourism can be a catalyst for growth and development but can also be an engine of destruction and environmental degradation if not properly regulated. In the context of the coastal tourism analysis and the current status and extent to which it affects economic development, as tourism increases, there is an increase in coastal user conflicts as well as an increase in the development of accommodation facilities within the fragile coastal ecosystem, which has led to the destruction of coral reefs, lagoons, and sand beaches (Government of Kenya (GoK), 2009; 2012). With this, it should be noted that EE refers to economic theory and practice that view the economy as operating within instead of downplaying the importance of culture, society, and nature (Capra and Jakobsen, 2017).



Source: Authors' own. A summary of Ecological Economics.

### ***3.2. Ecological Economics, Ecosystems, and the Blue Flag Status***

EE has played a leading role in developing the ecosystem services approach that has been viewed from different EE perspectives (Srivastava, Singh, Bhadouria, and Tripathi, 2020). Diop and Scheren (2016) state that valuable ecosystems are being subjected to a variety of human pressures, including overfishing, destructive fishing practices, pollution, damage and degradation of habitats, and disturbance of rivers and estuarine systems. Although there are high pressures on productive ecosystems, and this is a uniform theme throughout the coastal tourism development environmental analysis is a critical part of the planning process (Karbassi, Monavari, Bidhendi, Nouri, and Nematpour, 2008). Missemer (2018) describes ecosystem services as natural assets comprising resources and self-sustaining services". The consideration of Mthunzini's fragile ecosystems and the dynamics around economically developing the coast should stimulate the thinking of bringing the Blue Flag status.

The Blue Flag status was introduced to strike a balance between conserving beaches and promoting beach tourism (Williams and Micallef, 2009). England (2000) posits that natural capital (beaches) should play an important role in production processes before economists can anticipate any economic growth. This means balancing natural, economic, and social forms of capital. Blue Flags are increasingly adopted in many countries as an environmental brand to promote and encourage sustainable tourism (Lucrezi and Van der Merwe, 2015).



### ***3.3. Experiences of Losing the Blue Flag Status in KZN Beaches***

While blue flags are expensive to maintain, they are equally valued in terms of beach quality and indicate their popularity and recreational value. The South African media has depicted the Blue Flag status as highly important for the tourism sector, with estimated losses of ZAR 100 million annually in Durban following the award being revoked. The regulatory bodies withdrew the blue flag status after the death of fish species because of sanitation-related effluents that were discharged into the rivers from the beaches in 2008 (Mckenna, Williams, and Cooper, 2011). This was a result of a failure to strike a balance between human behaviour, institutions regulating behaviour, and the “state of natural capital stocks”, which is the quality and maintenance of coastal services (Fenichel and Abbott, 2013).

The loss of this award may be discouraging, and it serves as a tourism downturn and financial loss (Nahman and Rigby, 2008). A balance between the development of Mthunzini and the conservation of the environment is essential. Olaleet *et al.* (2020) maintain that coastal zones are essential for the realisation of a sustainable blue economy, particularly for countries that depend on them. Barbier (2019) recently called for the inclusion of ecosystem services in natural capital accounting because of their role in sustainable development. A more positive example of how well tourism development can lead to major conservation gains comes from Margate Beach. With blue flag status, Margate Beach (a popular destination in KwaZulu-Natal) attracts volumes of tourists, particularly in the summer, generating as much as ZAR290 million per annum, thereby showing evidence that such practices are meaningful (Le Roux *et al.*, 2005).

The consideration of gaining Blue Flag status requires careful consideration for decision-makers, considering the cost associated with such status (i.e., investment in infrastructure, Blue Flag status maintenance, and potential benefits from a revenue perspective). Mace, Hails, Cryle, Harlow, and Clarke (2015) call for a compilation of risk registers for natural capital assets and highlight several sectors where the compilation of such a register could be of great benefit. Ekins (2003) put more emphasis on “river systems, coastal wetlands, and water resources as part of critical natural capital. Following the withdrawal of the Blue Flag status at Margate Beach, the accumulated loss in Margate ranged from ZAR17 million per year (Nahman and Rigby, 2008).

### **3.4. Environmental Protection in South African Policy**

The implementation of the Blue Flag Status by coastal tourism destinations is located within an environmental protection, regulatory, and policy context in South Africa. In realisation of rights contained in Section 24 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the Act binds the organs of the state to implement the legislation applicable to biodiversity. It reads that within the framework of the National Environmental Management Act (NEMA), Act No. 107 of 1998, ...the National Environmental Management Biodiversity Act, No 10 of 2004 provides for the management and conservation of South Africa's biodiversity; the protection of species and ecosystems that warrant national protection; the sustainable use of indigenous biological resources; the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from bioprospecting involving indigenous biological resources; the establishment and functions of a South African National Biodiversity Institute; and for matters connected therewith (Laisani, Choma and Magoro, 2022: 70).

The NEMA is often invoked when a coastal tourism destination is scrutinised for its suitability for a blue flag status. This is mainly because the beach surroundings are an intricate part of a natural capital. Natural capital assets are irreplaceable and perform various socio-economic functions, hence, an enabling policy and regulatory environment are required to protect these assets (Chiesura and de Groot, 2003). The uMthunzini Estuary is further governed by the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act No. 57 of 2003, and the beach part of this protected area is governed by the National Water Act No. 36 of 1998 (Laisani et al., 2022).

As found in the framework, all spheres of government, including local government, should therefore adhere to and implement the Act. Laisani et al. (2022) observed a lack of cooperative governance in protected areas of “Fundudzi Lake and Thathe Vondo Forest in Limpopo Province, South Africa, due to low “inter-ministerial coordination”. However, the role played by the South African Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) in Mthunzini should be strengthened through the integration of the programmes together with KZN Ezemvelo Wildlife because literature has proven that through awareness and community development programmes, the resources on the coast can be sustained in a manner that is beneficial to all users of the coast. Nelson (2007) suggests the need for collaboration between the government, private sector, and local community in addressing complex

and development issues as the best approach. This collaboration is at the heart of environmental governance (Alaye, 2023). Such environmental education and information campaigns are essential (Lucrezi and Van der Merwe, 2015), and they will support the implementation of the legal framework that may affect sustainable coastal development.

EE and sustainable development have a long common history, and they continue to be mobilised as operating concepts in the field of environmental studies and in particular in ecological economics (Petit, 2017). In addition, the ecosystem service concept can be a useful method for guiding human decisions concerning ecosystems where trade-offs between the environment and society can be made to enhance human welfare sustainably (Costanza et al., 1997; Farber, Costanza, and Wilson, 2002).

Ecosystems and species have intrinsic rights to a healthy, sustaining condition that is on par with human rights to the satisfaction of preserving life. Human beings are one of many species in ecosystems, and the concerns of ecological economics are mostly with the survival of species and ecosystems (Costanza et al., 1997; Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993). According to Brousse-James and Associates (2009), Mthunzini Nature Reserve is endowed with 327 recorded bird species, 13 mammal species, alien animal species, indigenous species and rare reptiles which are vulnerable and can be easily endangered. This is the situation in the ecosystem today, but as ecological economics develops with a coherent vision of a sustainable future, policies for any national economy are driven to a very significant extent by strategic, political, and even ethical considerations and they have failed to keep up with forms of practice when used in regulation.

Moreover, the Integrated Coastal Management (ICM) Act is a specific environmental management act under the umbrella of the NEMA (Act No: 107 of 1998) enacted by the South African government to strengthen the protection of the environment at the coast. ICM is a legal tool or act that recognises ecological, social, and economic interactions within the ocean and land interface. The basis of ICM's existence is to guarantee that the development and utilisation of natural resources in the coastal area are both socially and economically viable while also being ecologically sustainable.

The ICM is aligned with international best practices. However, when considering development within the coastal area, it is not clear how it addresses development extensively, considering that coasts are a source of opportunity that must not only be harnessed and sustainably managed but also bring economic gains. Furthermore, Globe, Hill, and Phillips

(2017) point out that the key issue concerning the officials is a lack of coastal management knowledge and therefore suggest capacity building to implement the objectives of the ICM Act efficiently and effectively through improved understanding of the coastal environment, its function, and management.

This observation is shared by Alaye (2023), who concludes that the implementation of ICM in KZN “is fraught with challenges such as financing and human capacity at the provincial and local government level”. Wackernagel and Rees (1997) argued that the depletion of natural capital stocks is not only caused by minimal investments but also by a lack of biophysical measures of natural capital stocks, flows, and ecological footprints. This can include land where coastal economic activities are zoned. The Act requires coastal municipalities to set aside pieces of land that allow public access to the coast (Brett, 2019). The Act also includes provisions for creating coastal management boundaries and coastal access areas. Environmental analysis is a critical part of the planning process (Karbassi *et al.*, 2008).

Understanding the environmental sensitivity of Mthunzini and the factors that influence economic development and factors that threaten the natural environment, the tools provided by the ICM should be applied to control the degradation. In the same spirit, Mthunzini tourism facilities, beach access supporting infrastructure, litter and recycling bins, and trading stalls should be provided to bring about an ecological balance. Alaye (2023) concludes that in implementing ICM, the KZN government requires a strong partnership with NGOs, CBOs, and other stakeholders that participated in this study. Chaudhry (2022) also emphasised the role of religious communities in environmental stewardship, natural resource conservation, and management (water conservation, conservation of land, soil, and air, conservation of biodiversity). This collaboration is essential for uMthunzini Beach to reach its Blue Flag status.

## **4. Research Methodology**

### ***4.1. Research Approach, Design, and Sample***

This study used a qualitative approach to conduct research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 16 participants who took part in the study. The qualitative approach allowed the researchers to understand the people involved in coastal tourism management. Considering this study’s research problem, the focus is on understanding

sustainable coastal tourism in a fragile environment while potentially exploring means to economically develop the coast; thus, a qualitative approach is more appropriate.

The study adopted a case study design where participants and relevant stakeholders within the area of jurisdiction of Mthunzini were interviewed since it provided the opportunity to use many different sources of evidence (Yin, 2003). The participants included the Ward councillor, environmental practitioner, uMlalazi tourism officer, town planner, Kwa-Zulu Natal Ezemvelo Wildlife Conservation Manager, Operation Phakisa Small Harbours and Coastal Development Head of Department, King Cetshwayo District Municipality (KCDM) Planning and Economic Development Manager, Service provider (tour guide), local business owners such as the fisheries accessories shop, resort manager, and the bread and breakfast.

Mthunzini Residents Association (MRA) Chairperson, uMlalazi Community Tourism Secretary, Coastal Working Group Chairperson and Assistant Project Manager participated in the study. Their recruitment into this study was informed by their engagement in the aforementioned businesses and their relationship with tourism in uMlalazi. The Mthunzini Residents Association, uMlalazi Community Tourism, and Coastal Working 105 Group participants were meant to form focused groups initially, but the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to recruit a reasonable number of people that could form the groups. The aforesaid participants were then treated as individuals, and the interviews with them were conducted as such.

In this study, participants gave informed consent. They were provided in a bid to voluntarily participate in the study and were advised that the study was undertaken for academic purposes to avoid causing any harm to the participants. The interview guides accommodated both IsiZulu and English-speaking participants. The study promised to be confidential, anonymous, and private to maintain the actual use of participants' original names and adopted pseudonyms.

#### ***4.2. Data Collection Methods***

The researchers solicited information from interviewees, among whom were stakeholders and government reports such as strategies, plans, and images where the researchers observed natural activities without disturbing the research subjects (Hox and Boeije, 2005). Interviews were conducted at various locations, such as uMlalazi Local Municipality, King Cetshwayo District Municipality (KCDM), Mthunzini Residents

Association offices, Siyaya Coastal Park (Mthunzini), and Mthunzini Golf Estate Lodge, Mthunzini local shops, mainly with key experts who have a deep understanding of the issues and impacts associated with coastal tourism development. This study used individual interviews to obtain detailed information, particularly on the challenges hindering sustainable coastal tourism development in Mthunzini.

#### **4.2.1. Participant Observations**

The researchers conducted ten (10) site visits for field observations. The field observations were conducted at the local businesses, Mthunzini Beach, natural forest, wetland, UMLalazi River, railway, establishments and resorts, and land earmarked for development. A checklist was formulated to serve as a guideline for the observations, and it is presented below in the form of questions.

- What are the challenges that hinder the development of sustainable coastal tourism at the site?
- Are there any visible signs of potential sustainable coastal tourism in Mthunzini?
- Is the tourism infrastructure in good condition?

Observation tours around the Mthunzini town were thus conducted, including observation of ecosystems (beach, wetlands, natural forests, estuary, and lagoon) ecotourism (golf estates and parks), and resorts. The participants revealed the significance of coastal tourism concerning economic development, provided challenges hindering coastal tourism development, and provided solutions to most of the challenges.

This study used thematic analysis in combination with content analysis to analyse data. NVIVO Software, according to Bazeley (2007) and QSR International (2014), is a computer software package developed by QSR International that is suitable for analysis and to contextualise in-depth qualitative data. The software provided the researchers with the opportunity, after collecting data, to transcribe the data and identify emerging themes from the transcriptions. The notes were then fed into the NVIVO software for sorting, categorising, classifying, and arranging themes. Key emerging themes comprise the following: sustainable coastal tourism as a catalyst for local economic development (LED), environmental impact assessment (EIA), inadequate marketing,

advertising, and infrastructure and educational awareness, and blue flag status.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. *Participants' Views on Pursuing a Blue Flag Status in Mthunzini Beach*

Nelson et al. (2007) suggest the need for collaboration between government, the private sector, and local community in addressing complex and development issues as the best approach; thus, the study collected data from stakeholders in the various sectors. This partnership lies at the core of environmental governance practices (Alaye, 2023). Such environmental education and information campaigns are essential (Lucrezi and Van der Merve, 2015), and they will support the implementation of the NEMA framework that may affect sustainable coastal development. While attaining the Blue Flag status was supported by all the participants, they argued that it should be a marketing tool for environmentally sensitive tourism. Mthunzini Residents Association (MRA) Johannes Du Plessis (2021), a participant in the study and an expert involved in developing Mthunzini argued that *“A Blue Flag status will be good for Mthunzini as it holds many economic benefits, particularly from a preservation of the beach point of view.”* Concurringly, Geldenhuys and Van der Merwe (2014) affirmed that achieving Blue Flag status holds many benefits, such as preserving the natural environment and other conservation needs. This view is supported by most ecological economists (Wackernagel and Rees, 1997, Costanza et al., 1997; Ekins, 2003; Chiesura and de Groot, 2003 including recent studies by Mace *et al.*, 2015 Barbier, 2019; and Missemer, 2018), who are calling for the protection of the natural capital.

Importantly, Slater and Means (2018) advocate for a Blue Flag award as one of the potential eco-labels that aims to guide and shape tourism and development towards achieving high standards of safety, providing services, maintaining cleanliness, providing environmental education, and maintaining good management of the environment. The concerns of maintaining the blue flag status were captured by most of the participants, and one of their views. Environmental managers such as Thokozani Biyela (2020) explained, *“There is nothing worse than the area receiving a blue flag status and going down”*. The eco-labels also include water, quality but maintaining it is very expensive and requires more facilities, lifeguards, and the presence of security so that more people can be motivated to visit Mthunzini. There was a proposal to

have a Blue Flag status, although there were concerns about who would fund it as it is very expensive to maintain it. Slater and Means (2018) further believe that South Africa's two hurdles in keeping the blue flag status are primarily the cost of implementation (admin and maintenance costs) and the difficulty of achieving the strict water quality standard.

Moreover, shark nets were among the requirements, and they are currently not viable. Slater and Mearns (2018) assert that although South Africa may have some reservations towards the Blue Flag eco-label, it has a positive impact on South Africa's coastal tourism industry. Mir-Gual *et al.* (2015) echo the same sentiments that a blue flag status symbolises high standards, distinction, and impacts tourists' choices of beaches to visit. Slater and Means (2018) conclude in their study that municipalities located along the stretches of the beach should continue to implement the Blue Flag status criteria to ensure the maintenance of their Blue Flag status.

## ***5.2. Maintaining a Blue Flag Status at Mthunzini Beach***

The maintenance of a Blue Flag status at Mthunzini Beach resonates with Chaundhry's (2022) notion of environmental stewardship and in particular the role of the religious communities in environmental conservation, water conservation, conservation of land, soil and air and conservation of the biodiversity. This is further supported by Alaye (2023), who outlined the challenges faced by the KZN Government and uMlalazi Local Municipality in the implementation of the Integrated Coastal Management Act. There is therefore a need for the various tourism stakeholders to collaborate and bring along CBOs and NGOs to strengthen Mthunzini as a tourism destination of choice in KZN and in South Africa.

The legislative and policy framework is available to guide both the KZN Government and uMlalazi Local Municipality in maintaining the Blue Flag status and ensure that once this prestigious status is obtained, efforts are made not to lose it, like in the case of Margate, Durban, and other coastal cities in South Africa. Thus, recognising the significance of the Mthunzini coast as a vital component of natural capital is essential, as it plays a crucial role in supplying valuable goods and services to South Africa's economy, necessitating ongoing maintenance and appreciation. This requires strong ecological governance and institutions that ensure that once a Blue Flag status is obtained, the Mthunzini Coast is expected to protect and use such a status to bolster tourism development. As Lindo Khanyile explained and as Mthunzini Tourism Association's



Angelina Reed explained, “There are no existing partnerships, and it can be easy for the municipality to develop that area, so that we can do everything together and we work in silos. There are memoranda of agreement because they are only signed if there are existing projects that are initiated”.

As such, efforts with all stakeholders need to be put in place to avoid the depletion of natural capital and thus ensure that there is a complementary role in the production of natural and social forms of capital (England, 2000). Mthunzini Coastal Town is expected to always ensure that it often keeps a risk register for natural capital assets (Mace *et al.*, 2015) to observe all the regulatory and policy mechanisms essential to keeping the blue flag Status.

### *5.2.1. Developing the Right Infrastructure*

It was found from the interviews that the existing tourism sites need to be revamped, consequently; the findings postulate that the lack of infrastructure remains a challenge. In addition, the lack of such facilities may pose a serious challenge to attracting tourists to Mthunzini. Furthermore, the development of such facilities requires effective public participation, mainly to avoid poorly built facilities because they are highly unlikely to work well. Some interventions were suggested by the participants, and one of them is presented below.

“The Municipal Infrastructure Grant (MIG) should be looked at closely, tourism infrastructure should be accommodated and on every MIG we get, 15 % set aside for tourism infrastructure should be prioritised. The blue flag status requires more facilities, and the feasibility study should assist on that one” (TP Lindo Khanyile, 2021).

Part of what is necessary towards developing the right infrastructure in Mthunzini is developing the right partnerships between the public and private sectors. As Bullock (2019) explains, public-private partnership agreements are used when local governments enter into the construction of a joint public-private venture or when the public is providing large subsidies. This, says Bullock (2019), is perceived to increase the chances of success in developing infrastructure. By so doing, uMlalazi Local Municipality can benefit economically, ecologically, and socially, as explained by the EE. A consistent, theory-driven approach centred on EE for a sustainability-led application of the Blue Flag in Mthunzini is achievable.

## 6. Conclusion

The blue flag status is a helpful tool for sustainable approaches to coastal development. As this study has illustrated, EE is perhaps the most beneficial approach to pursuing blue flag status, as it not only prevents the exploitation of the natural environment for economic reasons, but it also takes seriously the roles of public and private partnerships and balances them with society's views. To accomplish its goal, this qualitative research conducted interviews with key stakeholders to discuss the potential of obtaining a Blue Flag status at Mthunzini Beach. The study considered the history of the blue flag, and the experiences of KZN beaches that once received and lost their blue flag status and assessed the implications thereof with the views of Mthunzini Beach's stakeholders. While there is broad consensus on the benefits a blue flag status would bring to Mthunzini Beach, there is high alert about the possible loss of the Blue Flag status, which, based on the experiences of other KZN beaches, would be more costly than never reaching a Blue Flag status.

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