

# The implementation of a world-famous tourism ecolabel triggers political support for beach management

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## ABSTRACT

Blue Flag (BF) is one of the most renowned tourism ecolabels in the world. Although this ecolabel is based primarily on environmental education and management, it is argued that its core strength is the capacity to trigger political will. This paper presents the BF implementation process in a country through application of a BF Readiness Matrix and interviews with key stakeholders in eight coastal municipalities in Colombia. The matrix used 87 items to assess the level of compliance of 12 beaches with each of the 33 BF criteria. The challenges faced in the implementation of BF are presented and discussed. Because they are not unique to Colombia, the results and conclusions are applicable to many low and middle-income countries that historically have not committed to the management of tourist beaches. The conclusions underline the capacity of BF to raise political will to support beach management and generate specific management actions.

## 1. Introduction

Beach certification schemes (BCS) are management systems designed specifically for beaches to evaluate their characteristics through measurable compliance criteria (Zielinski & Botero, 2015). BCS can take the form of awards, ecolabels, or management systems based on continuous improvement of performance (Botero, Williams, & Cabrera, 2014). In return for compliance with a set of criteria, the beaches receiving the award are allowed commercial usage of a name and logo of a specific ecolabel. The development of ecolabels in the tourism industry began in 1985 with the introduction of the Blue Flag Campaign that was first implemented in 1987 (Font, 2002). As of 2018, there were over 4500 Blue Flag beaches in 45 countries around the world ([www.blueflag.org](http://www.blueflag.org), 2018). Most of these were originally located in Europe, but more recently, the Blue Flag Campaign has expanded its coverage to all continents. To obtain a Blue Flag, beaches must meet 33 criteria concerning four categories: environmental education and information, water quality, environmental management, and safety and services (Appendix 1). The Blue Flag Campaign has been advertised in the media to promote the sustainable development of coastal areas through good environmental practices, encouraging cooperation between the tourism and other sectors and by educating visitors, managers and the wider public through campaigns and a code of conduct (Fraguell, Martí, Pintó, & Coenders, 2015). The BF has generated wider media coverage than

any other BCS, inspiring the confidence of managers and local governments. After many years of operating, it has become well known for its ability to act as a public marketing tool (Ariza, Sarda, Jimenez, Mora, & Avila, 2008; McKenna, Williams, & Cooper, 2011; Nelson, Morgan, Williams, & Wood, 2000). Destinations that implement the BF show a high level of loyalty for the award, using it as a guarantee of compliance with current legislation, and generally good quality standards (Fraguell et al., 2015).

Despite positive public opinion, scientific literature has been rather critical about the positive aspects of BF and other BCS (Zielinski & Botero, 2019). The voices of criticism can be generally categorized as those arguing for either its low commercial value and/or its inutility as an environmental tool for sustainable management of beaches. The studies in the former group point out BF's low commercial recognition and resulting inability to attract visitors (Nelson & Botterill, 2002; Dolch & Schernewski, 2002; McKenna et al., 2011; Nelson et al., 2000), its high cost of implementation and maintenance (McKenna et al., 2011), and its objectives heavily focused on the improvement of tourism facilities (e.g., Boevers, 2008; Micallef, Morgan, & Williams, 1999; Mir-Gual et al., 2015; Phillips & House, 2009; Williams & Micallef, 2009).

Regardless of the criticism, BF guarantee compliance with current legal requirements in terms of hygiene, sanitation, and the environment, and provides an assurance of safety and wellbeing for both

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tourists and the local population (Fraguell et al., 2015). It can be argued, therefore, that the marketing value of a BCS is not its main strength. Its role as a management tool is far more important, acting as a template for achieving environmentally sound management and visitor satisfaction (McKenna et al., 2011; Williams & Micallef, 2009; Zielinski & Botero, 2015). The ready-made, off-the-shelf criteria provided by BCS are useful as a clear guideline, without which the beach may not be managed to that standard (Klein & Dodds, 2018). Another key role played by BCS is environmental education. Recent studies revealed that managers value the program for its activities for citizens and students (Pencarelli, Splendiani, & Fraboni, 2016; Ulme, Graudipa-Bombiza, & Ernsteins, 2018). The environmental education requirement, present in all BCS, provides a platform for integration of activities with municipal environmental education strategies and supporting partnerships with local environmental initiatives, NGOs, schools, and media (Ulme et al., 2018).

Perhaps the most prominent role of certifications is their ability to gather local stakeholders around the common purpose of defining standards they are willing to work to achieve. In consequence, agreements are made between managers, funders, scientists, and beneficiaries that can form partnerships (Zielinski & Botero, 2015), which is especially important for beach managers who lack either funding or scientific expertise (Zielinski & Botero, 2019). The beach management prospect provided by BCS and supported by a positive public image of certifications is a complete package that appeals to politicians who are eager to exchange a small part of their budget for approval from the powerful stakeholders and potential voters. The political decision to pursue a certification almost instantly generates resources for meeting the compliance criteria, and later for the maintenance of the certification (McKenna et al., 2011). The relevance of the argument that BF gathers resources and political support is central for countries where beaches receive very little attention and budget from local authorities (Zielinski & Botero, 2019). Despite the potential, the political aspect of BCS has been largely ignored in the literature.

This paper argues that without the framework provided by BF criteria, many of the management actions would have not taken place on many beaches around the world. This argument is central to the debate about the actual effect of BF on beaches that have seen little to none management. Therefore, it is the purpose of this paper to reevaluate scientific opinion about Blue Flag from the experience of a country initiating and implementing the ecolabel for the very first time. It is argued that in order to understand the real value of Blue Flag and other BCS, there is a need for studies that evaluate tourism beaches from the point of view of the entire process of acquiring certification by looking at the before-and-after story of the beach and the local political situation (Boevers, 2008; Zielinski & Botero, 2015). Furthermore, to validate the claims about BF improving beaches, the research should focus on determining what difference the Blue Flag award is making by detailing the specific improvements (Boevers, 2008; Zielinski & Botero, 2019). This paper responds to both of these remarks, contributing to the current debates in various ways: (1) it is the first paper that describes the process and challenges at national level faced by a country introducing the BF program; (2) the study evaluates the beaches before joining the BF program, laying the groundwork for a longitudinal research to show the changes that took place; (3) the paper lists management actions that have been implemented shortly after the initiation of the process as a result of pursuing the certification; and (4) points out the strengths of BF as a management tool describing its capacity to gather political support for managing public beaches, emphasizing its importance in the context of developing nations. This aspect has been largely overlooked in the literature because of the geographic focus of researchers on BF beaches in highly developed countries with a long tradition of sun, sea and sand (3S) tourism and beach management (e.g., Creo & Fraboni, 2011; Pencarelli et al., 2016). With exception of the abovementioned papers, the political support generated by certification schemes has rarely been discussed in the wider context of tourism ecolabels because

beach certifications differ from commercial ecolabels in the way that they apply to public areas and are often funded from public budgets.

### 1.1. Colombia as an example of a country implementing blue flag

It is not surprising that the countries with the most BF beaches are also the major receptors of 3S tourism. Traditionally, 3S tourism has centered on the Mediterranean, southeastern Asia and the Caribbean due to the guarantee of sunny weather and excellent beach and bathing water conditions (UNWTO, 2016). Although located in the Caribbean basin with more than 3000 km of coast, Colombia is not a major player in terms of tourist arrivals and 3S tourism due to its turbulent past that affected the image of the country. With only 4.11 M international visitors in 2017 (MCIT, 2018) it is nowhere near the visitor numbers to the Latin American region giant Mexico that reported 39 M arrivals in the same year (WTTC, 2018). In Mexico, 45% of tourists choose the coastal zone as their destination (Mendoza-González et al., 2018), while in Colombia only 15% (DANE, 2013). The potential for beach tourism has not been fully seized, despite the recent legislation exclusively designed to manage the beaches. Indeed, the Decree 1766 of 2013 created the Local Beach Organization Committees (LBOC), which are in charge of managing the zoning, safety and facilities. Similar bodies have been established only in Mexico, where the Clean Beaches Committees were created in 2003 (CONAGUA, 2017).

According to the legal framework, the LBOCs consist of three permanent and full-rights members: 1. The Municipal Mayoralty, the body responsible for local actions in several areas such as safety, security, and hygiene, among others; 2. The Maritime Authority, which is an institution consisting of representatives of the Navy in charge of controlling maritime traffic, beach occupancy, and application of the requirements of the International Maritime Organization through its regional offices; 3. The Ministry of Tourism, which leads the national tourism policy from its offices in Bogota and delegates a public servant to attend the LBOC meetings (Fig. 1). Moreover, the head of the local Police Department and the Commander of Coastguards are permanent guests with a right to participate and voice their opinions during the meetings, but without a right to vote. Additionally, the Municipal Mayoralty can invite any person or institution considered important for a particular meeting, but these guests have no voting rights. It should be mentioned that environmental authorities are not part of the LBOC, but according to Article 9 of the Decree 1766, they have a right to veto decisions that violate environmental regulations.

### 1.2. Beach management, public policy and political will

Tourist beaches are considered public spaces in most countries in

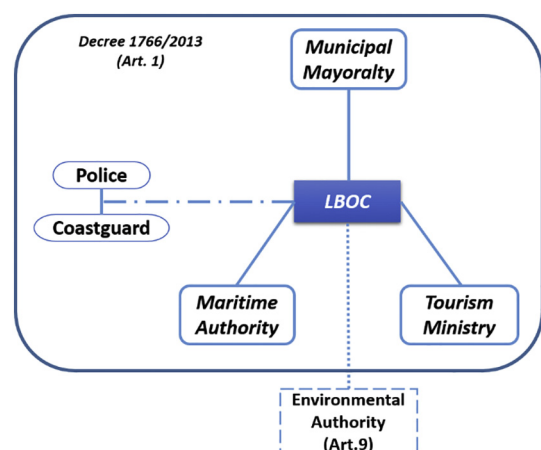


Fig. 1. Structure of the Local Beach Organization Committee in Colombia (According to Decree 1766/2013).

the world. As their urban counterparts, public beaches are located within the public realm of SEP (someone else's problem) (Carmona, 2010), a dynamic of common-property described by Gordon (1954) that served as a basis for the theory of commons (Lloyd, 1977). Common properties, such as beaches, if not managed, may suffer from the same issue of neglect as public urban spaces leading to bad sanitary conditions, deterioration of infrastructure, and lack of safety and security. The general public, who make up the main user group, expect the local government to manage, clean and provide adequate conditions for leisure and tourism (Dadon, 2018). Because beach tourism has proven to be an important driver for local economic development, governments spend a significant amount of resources to maintain its beaches in desirable environmental, social and managerial condition (Zielinski et al., 2019<sup>\*\*</sup>). Consequently, in many countries that rely on coastal tourism, beach management has become an important aspect of public policy (Azuz-Adeath et al., 2018).

A public policy is an action program of one or more public or governmental authorities in relation to a sectorial level of society or in a given territorial space (Yves & Thoenig, 1989). In other words, the state seeks to address or manage diverse problems through public policy (Salazar, 1999). Governance of coastal areas, and more specifically, beach management (BM), is a complex process that involves making a decision to undertake or not undertake actions that reflect governing policy objectives and the socio-economic and environmental capabilities of beach areas (Simm, 1996). This need to prioritize among conflicting aspects of socio-economic and environmental interests is a function of beach management and Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) objectives (Williams & Micallef, 2009). The latter concept is an application of the former on a larger scale. Sound management of beach areas involves legislative and enforcement mechanisms aimed at management of the physical environment of the beach, and human activities and their impacts. The process is complex as it requires attention to environmental conditions of the beach, public health and safety standards, management of diverse and often incompatible activities, land management, and tourism quality to satisfy needs and desires of visitors centered in the "Big Five" (Scenery, Absence of litter, Safety, Facilities, and Water Quality) (Williams & Micallef, 2009). Because of the integration of BCS within ICZM, the link between BF and political will is easier to demonstrate. In fact, the dilemma around what should be first, the ICZM programs or the BCS implementation, is solved through a loop in which ICZM could be understood as a framework for a BCS such as BF (Fig. 2). Conversely, the implementation of BCS could trigger much-needed political will to start an ICZM program through public policies and governance initiatives (Botero et al., 2014).

For a public policy to be effective, there is a need for tools and mechanisms that facilitate or guarantee compliance with its key objectives (Yanes, Zielinski, Díaz Cano, & Kim, 2019). Ecolabels and environmental certifications in the whole tourism value chain through Environmental Management Systems (EMS) are considered appropriate tools for management of coastal tourism (Tonazzini et al., 2019) and they work to recognize good management practices (Williams & Micallef, 2009). Policy implementation also requires political will. Political will is defined as "the extent of committed support among key decision makers for a particular policy solution to a particular problem" (Post, Raile, & Raile, 2010, p. 659). The authors add that political will exists when 1) a sufficient set of decision-makers 2) with a common understanding of a particular problem on the formal agenda 3) is committed to supporting 4) a commonly perceived, potentially effective policy solution.

The commitment to supporting can be demonstrated through binding statements or specific actions (Post et al., 2010) carried out in support of a BCS implementation that is perceived to be a potentially effective policy solution. For public sector officials, ecolabels ensure compliance with regulations and much higher standards through an off-the-shelf package (Fraguell et al., 2015; Pencarelli et al., 2016) without the need for burdensome bureaucratic control and inspection procedures by public authorities. Blue Flag, therefore, can be seen as an effective tool for achieving public policy objectives centered on ensuring compliance with health and safety standards, environmental management and education, coastal zoning, and the integration of stakeholders through the LBOC. At the same time, certifications are believed to provide commercial value in terms of a comparative advantage and direct and indirect economic benefits for the destination, stimulating the tourism industry (Boevers, 2008). In this way, various policy objectives specific to coastal areas and more generally focused on leisure and economic activities can be met. Indeed, "ecolabels can be used as instruments of government policy as well as mechanisms for consumer choice" (Buckley, 2001, p. 23<sup>\*\*</sup>), which can encourage tourism stakeholders to get involved in the pursuit of BF and the general public to support it, according to the logic of collective action (Olson, 1965<sup>\*\*</sup>).

Besides the political support for BF generated as a result of willingness to comply with regulations and policies that are widely supported by general public, the literature on tourism ecolabels and on resource mobilization points to other factors that may foster political support. According to Font (2001), stakeholders pursuing ecolabels can be categories based on their motivation. The 'leaders' seek prestige given by certification, which give them a competitive edge that they use as a promotional tool. The literature on resource mobilization expands

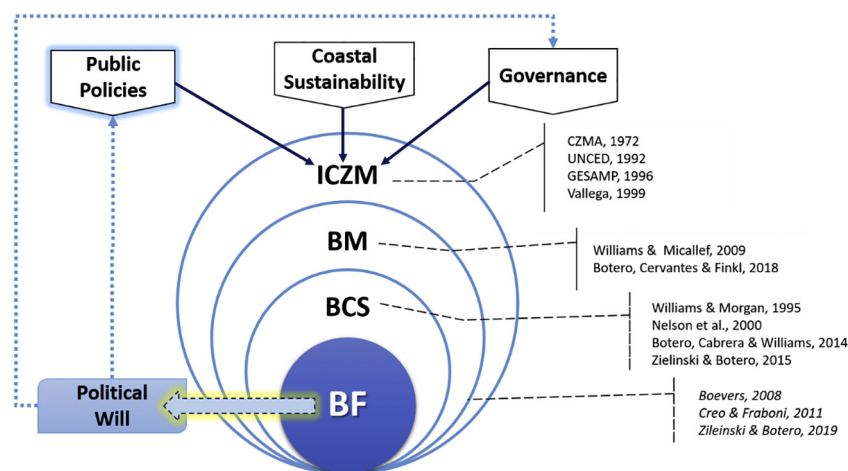


Fig. 2. Conceptual framework.

CZMA - Coastal Zone Management Act 1972, 1972; GESAMP - Group of Experts on the Scientific Aspects of Marine Environmental Protection, 1996; UNCED - United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 2020; Vallega, 1999.

on that by stating that incentives play a significant role in political support. Enhancement of influence and reputation is just one of them, others being general public support for the policy that translates to support for politicians, and the ability to mobilize external resources from central government or sectorial funds (e.g., tourism funds) to finance a specific policy implementation (Bahl, Miner, & Schroeder, 1984).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Preparatory phase

The Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), the owner of the BF brand, has a strict procedure to accept new countries into its programs, which starts with the interested party's affiliation in one of their five programs. Although this role is usually assumed by a non-governmental organization, in Colombia this action was carried out by the MCIT in 2015 (Botero, 2017). The following step in the BF program is preparation of a feasibility study, which covers eight topics ranging from the regulatory framework and description of the coastal areas in question to the analysis of regional cooperation and stakeholders linked with beach management in the country. In Colombia, the feasibility study was also completed by the MCIT with inputs from 33 public institutions at the national level, and it was approved by FEE in April 2017. Once approved, the next step is a selection of three to five beaches as pilot projects for BF implementation.

The selection phase turned out to be very challenging. Despite a considerable body of research about beaches in Colombia (e.g., Botero, Anfuso, Williams, & Palacios, 2013; Rangel-Buitrago, Correa, Anfuso, Ergin, & Williams, 2013; Williams, Rangel-Buitrago, Anfuso, Cervantes, & Botero, 2016), the country did not have an official inventory of its tourist beaches. The MCIT had to define a specific pathway to select the pilot beaches in the most objective way possible (Fig. 3). First, the local authorities of all the 47 coastal municipalities in the country were approached with a request to identify their most prominent tourist beaches based on the 33 criteria of BF program. Stemming from the data sent by the municipalities, two selection procedures were employed: (1) Assessment of technical feasibility; (2) Assessment of institutional feasibility. The former was a quantitative evaluation of the 33 criteria requested by BF (Appendix 1), grounded in the information sent by the municipalities. The latter was an evaluation based on the institutional inclusion of the beach in public initiatives such as development plans, local committees and awareness campaigns. Consequently, twelve beaches with the highest scores obtained from the feasibility evaluation were selected for in situ assessment of the conditions reported by the municipalities, which led to the identification of the final five beaches to be included in the pilot phase. Finally, an improvement plan was established for each beach to reach the level of compliance with 33 criteria in the shortest possible timeframe. Fig. 4 shows the locations of the eight municipalities that decided to carry out the evaluation exercise and the 12 pre-pilot beaches selected based on the total score of their readiness for BF implementation (Botero, 2018).

### 2.2. Evaluation phase

The analysis was carried out on the twelve pre-pilot beaches selected by MCIT to establish a management baseline. First, the level of compliance of the beaches with BF criteria was identified to illustrate the thematic categories that represent a higher level of readiness for BF implementation. A BF readiness matrix was built to compile this information based on the BF Explanatory Notes to ensure the integrity of information and applicability of the items (Appendix 2). Because many of the 33 BF criteria are composite components, they are often difficult to measure, hence, they were broken down into 87 items (sub-criteria) to ensure full measurability of each of the BF criteria. For example, the water quality criterion was broken down into various measurable items

(sub-criteria).

The BF Readiness Matrix allowed evaluation of 87 aspects of each beach according to four readiness levels: Compliance, Partial Compliance, No Compliance, and Not Applicable. These simple and unambiguous categories of readiness were chosen to ensure reliability of the scoring exercise and replicability of the results. 'Compliance' was allotted when the aspect was fully present as per description (e.g., Code of conduct approved). 'Partial compliance' referred to aspects which demonstrated some level of advancement, but not full compliance (e.g., Lifeguards in service, but without all equipment specifically requested by BF). 'No compliance' referred to aspects without any advancement, and 'not applicable' to aspects that could not be assessed at the specific beach (e.g., Turtle nesting).

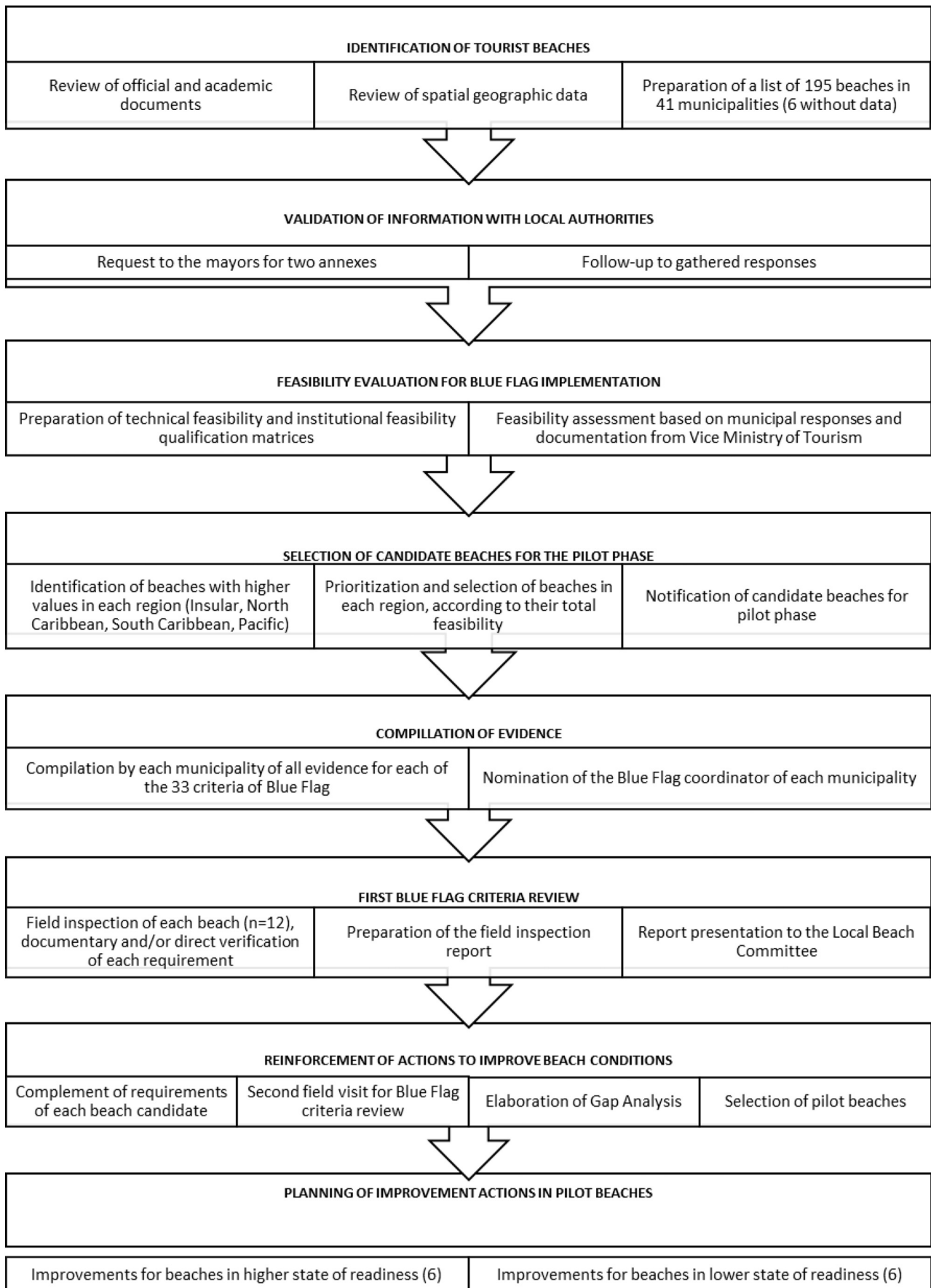
The BF Readiness Matrix was applied based on information gathered on each of the twelve pre-pilot beaches between October and November 2017, with support of the local municipalities. Initially, the person in charge of BF implementation in each municipality assigned the level of readiness to each aspect, highlighting the evidence to support the assigned value. Afterward, the researchers validated the values assigned with the evidence provided by the local authorities and inspection at the site. Because the items chosen for the evaluation were easily measurable and only two stages of compliance were used (full and not full/partial), there was no risk of misjudgment. This instrument allowed the grouping of the values of the 87 items (Appendix 2) in four categories of BF criteria, showing the beaches' readiness level as a percentage of compliance with all items in each category (Fig. 5). For example, if a beach complied fully with five aspects, partially with three, did not comply with eight, and one aspect was not applicable, in a category with a total of 17 aspects, the calculated percentages would be 29%, 18%, 47% and 6%, respectively.

Second, the Local Beach Organization Committees (LBOC) were interviewed to find out whether the political will was raised for BF implementation and whether specific beach management actions were generated as a result. The interviews were carried out on the public officers in charge of beach management in the eight municipalities implementing the BF, based on the official records of the LBOC meetings carried out between October and November 2017 (Table 1). The questions were designed to address the perceptions of public officers about the political will and actual actions implemented by the municipality as a direct result of preparations for BF implementation.

Each interview took between 30 and 90 min, with the exception of two municipalities (Buenaventura and San Andrés Island) that each had three pre-pilot beaches. The interviewees were asked specific questions shown in Table 2. Moreover, they were encouraged to elaborate and provide supporting details to their responses. The answers were recorded and subsequently transcribed in Spanish. It has to be recognized that although most questions asked about the actual actions, one question was based on perceptions of the officers, and the answer should be analyzed with that fact in mind. The results were compared with the growing body of literature about BF to find out whether the findings of this study are supported by experiences in other countries.

## 3. Results

The findings of the research are divided into two main groups: the readiness level of each of the twelve pre-pilot beaches, and management actions triggered as a result of the implementation of BF in each municipality. The first group of results allowed the establishment of a baseline for further assessment planned five years later to quantitatively measure the effect of actions as a direct consequence of BF implementation at those beaches. The second group of findings shows the respondents' answers to the four questions of the interview, including the specific actions triggered by BF in each municipality that declared participation in the program led by the MCIT. These actions centered on beach management, declared political support, budget allocation and local stakeholders' involvement in BF implementation.



(caption on next page)

**Fig. 3.** Methodological path for the Blue Flag implementation in Colombia. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

(IC: Insular Caribbean; SC: South Caribbean; NC: North Caribbean; PC: Pacific)

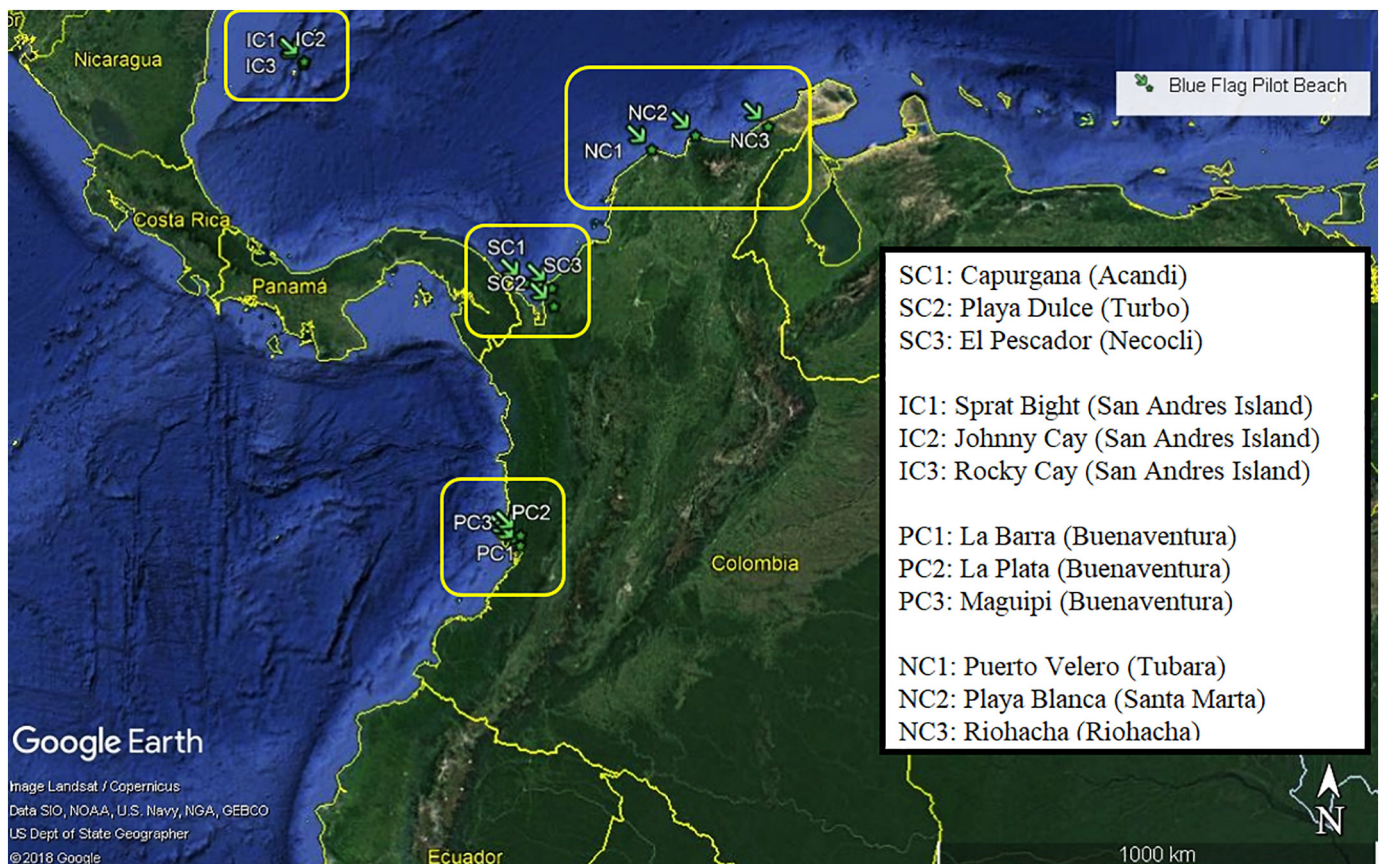
Fig. 5 shows the level of readiness of the 12 beaches in four BF categories. The results illustrate a low level of compliance of the majority of beaches. All surveyed beaches did not comply with requirements in at least two out of four categories, and 75% demonstrated no compliance in all four categories. The Insular Caribbean region, which is an oceanic archipelago with three small islands, presented the best results in terms of compliance with BF requirements. The three pre-pilot beaches were located on the main island, called San Andres, and environmental information and education was the highest-scoring category (29% mean compliance). Conversely, the South Caribbean region had the lowest level of compliance in all four categories (3%), with the highest scores concentrated in the environmental management category (23%).

The 12 beaches presented the highest level of compliance in the environmental management category (21%), followed by environmental information and education (18%), and safety and services (15%). On the other hand, beaches did not comply with 67% of the water quality requirements, showing an important weakness in all four coastal regions. This is caused by the lack of any regular water quality monitoring system in the majority of the studied beaches and consequent lack of information about their suitability for bathing. This result, however, does not indicate low water quality.

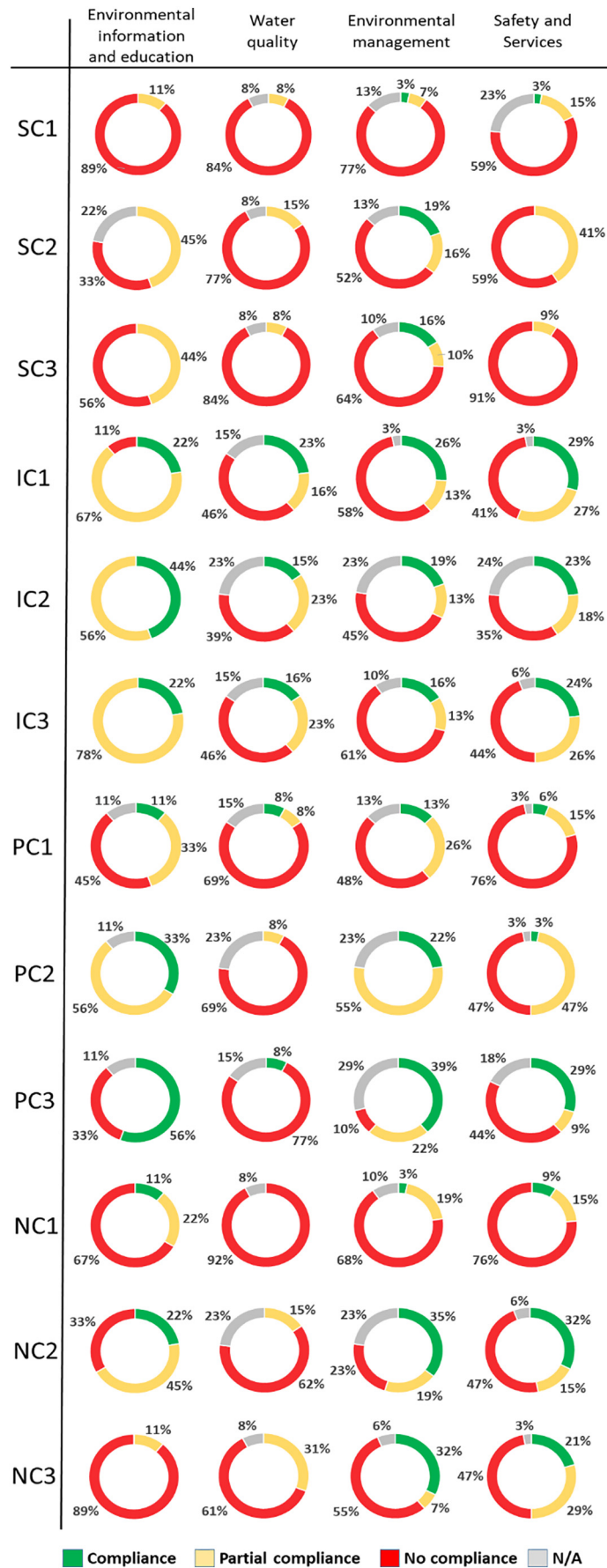
Some of the BF criteria depend on the local natural conditions (i.e., presence of seagrass meadows, marine protected areas or sea turtle habitat). Whenever these habitats were absent, the particular requirements were categorized as 'not applicable'. All beaches on the Pacific coast had at least one requirement marked as N/A, with the highest

value (29%) reported on PC3 due to beach access by boat, and the absence of strategic ecosystems such as coral reefs and seagrass meadows.

Although the implementation of the BF program was a national initiative led by the MCIT, it required the municipalities to take specific actions at the local level. Initially, despite the MCIT's promotion and support for the BF implementation by the LBOC that generated high interest of the majority of local authorities, the interviews with public officers of each municipality showed many challenges faced in meeting the BF criteria. The results of the survey demonstrated that only two of the local authorities were aware of BF before the MCIT commenced the process (San Andres Island and Santa Marta). Despite many barriers encountered in the majority of municipalities, according to the respondents BF mobilized public and private institutions to get involved in the program and in consequence different stakeholders assumed leadership of various initiatives. A remarkable example is Riohacha beach (NC3), located in the north of the Caribbean coast. The tourism authority developed and implemented several initiatives within the local public institutions, including creation of a new position exclusively for managing the municipal beaches. Despite an unstable political situation (several mayors within a couple of years), the interviewed officer stated that "the LBOC has supported the BF implementation the whole time and the goal of obtaining a BF beach has been adopted by all the mayors, independently of their political views". The officer further stressed "our efforts secured the support of several institutions for BF implementation, (...), even the environmental authority that initially was reluctant because they were not part of the LBOC... but thanks to the goal of



**Fig. 4.** Selected pre-pilot beaches.



■ Compliance ■ Partial compliance ■ No compliance ■ N/A

Fig. 5. Level of compliance with Blue Flag criteria (October 2017). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

**Table 1**  
Interview questions for public officers responsible for implementation of BF.

Question	
1.	Were you aware of BF before the introduction of the beach certification by MCIT?
2.	To what degree has BF mobilized public institutions to become involved in the program?
2a.	Which public institutions/departments became involved in BF implementation?
2b.	Were financial resources allocated for BF implementation? This refers to temporary resources allocated for specific actions as well as regular budget allocated for BF and beach management.
2c.	Was support for BF declared by high-level officials and local politicians (perceptions)?
3.	Which private organizations became involved in BF implementation?
4.	Which specific actions have already been realized as a result of BF implementation?

Municipality	Institution	Position
Necocli	Planning Secretariat	Tourism Director
Turbo	Planning Secretariat	Tourism Director
San Andres	Tourism Secretariat	Tourism Secretary
Acandi	Planning Secretariat	Tourism and Infrastructure Advisor
Buenaventura	Tourism Secretariat	Tourism Secretary
Riohacha	Economic Development Secretariat	Beach Management Coordinator
Santa Marta	Tourism Public Institute	Tourism Director
Tubara	Planning Secretariat	Tourism Director

obtaining the BF, every stakeholder wants to participate.”

In terms of institutions and organizations that became involved in BF implementation, the majority of beaches were led by local tourism authorities, which are part of the LBOC and the first institutions addressed by the MCIT to implement the certification. The majority of the public officers interviewed highlighted how BF implementation helped them to improve sustainability on the beach, and to reach general agreements among institutions and other local stakeholders. The respondents identified diverse organizations interested in BF, which created very specific institutional arrangements. In this way, several private sector and civil society stakeholders also got involved. For example, in Buenaventura (Pacific Coast), where two of the pilot beaches are located within a natural park (PC1, PC2), the local officials responsible for BF implementation stressed that the Community Council of each beach displayed a high level of interest and motivation to implement the certification, despite their scarcity of financial resources. The official explained: “Community Councils have very few resources because they are ethnic groups without public funding. Nevertheless, they have supported the initiative (of obtaining BF) with their scarce budget. In La Plata (PC2), for example, the local tour-operator declared its total commitment to the initiative”. Another remarkable example of stakeholder

engagement initiatives is the case of Maguipi beach (PC3), also in Buenaventura District, where the private sector supported BF certification. This beach is managed entirely by a beachfront hotel with the owners assuming the financing and implementation of every aspect required to obtain BF. Despite their limited knowledge of beach management, and several natural challenges in running 3S tourism on the Pacific coast of Colombia, their interest in BF was highlighted during an interview with the local officer: “the owner and the manager of Maguipi Hotel have supported the initiative (implementation of BF) since the very first meeting, even despite the Pacific coast (of Colombia) being more of a nature than a 3S tourism destination”.

Another aspect worth highlighting is the engagement of tourism brokers, which became the key stakeholders to propose and implement various actions and strategies at four beaches (Playa Blanca, El Pescador, Rocky Cay, and Puerto Velero). For the purpose of this article, the examples of Playa Blanca and El Pescador demonstrate the commitment of local actors driven by the political decision to pursue BF. The former is a semi-remote beach in Santa Marta District (NC2) managed mainly by a corporation of small tourism brokers (called CORSOTUR) that controls every aspect of the beach. Although the public officer interviewed assured total support from the Municipal

**Table 2**  
Improvements started in beaches stemming from Blue Flag implementation.

Coastal region	Beach	Improvements	Responsible
Pacific	Maguipi	Lifeguard tower, signage (i.e., information board, hazards, toilets, first aid), zoning (high and low tide), environmental education activities, risk management plan	Private hotel at the beachfront
Pacific	La Barra	Environmental activities with Parks Authority, litter bins and recycling, traffic control of motorbikes on the sand, pedestrian pathways.	Local Community
Pacific	La Plata	Environmental activities with Parks Authority, litter bins and recycling, sewage treatment, lifeguard services, signage (i.e., information board, hazards)	Local Community
North Caribbean	Riohacha	Code of conduct, cooperation between public and private organizations, zoning, litter bins and recycling, renovation of toilets, accessibility, dune conservation, beach management plan, environmental management of cultural events on the sand.	Local Tourism Authority
North Caribbean	Playa Blanca	Diversifying environmental education activities, risk management plan, signage (i.e., information board, hazards, toilets, first aid).	Tourism brokers Corporation
North Caribbean	Puerto Velero	Code of conduct, parking zone outside the sandy beach area, maintenance of facilities and restaurants, signage (i.e., hazards, prohibitions)	Regional Tourism Authority + Tourism brokers
South Caribbean	El Pescador	Wastewater treatment, zoning, integration of tourism brokers and authorities, environmental education activities, beach cleaning	Local Tourism Authority + Tourism brokers
South Caribbean	Playa Dulce	Lifeguard's tower and personnel, zoning, code of conduct, environmental education activities	Local Tourism Authority
South Caribbean	Capurganá	No improvements reported	Local Tourism Authority
Insular Caribbean	Sprat Bight	Wastewater treatment, environmental education activities, accessibility	Local Tourism Authority
Insular Caribbean	Rocky Cay	Environmental education activities, beach cleaning, raising awareness of tourism brokers, pet control	Local Tourism Authority + Tourism brokers
Insular Caribbean	Johnny Cay	Beach quality monitoring, signage (i.e., beach quality, marine ecosystems), litter bins and recycling	Environmental Authority



Mayorality for the BF implementation, the LBOC's records showed that actions toward implementing BF in Playa Blanca have been carried out by this consortium. The other example is El Pescador beach in Necocli (SC3), where the local authority organized beach activities and tourism stakeholders at the beach (mainly restaurants and hotels) and established a corporation similar to the one at Playa Blanca. Indeed, the interviewed officer recognized that Playa Blanca reflected the El Pescador beach corporation.

Another example of support for BF declared by high level officials is Johnny Cay beach (IC2), which is a provincial park managed by a regional environmental authority. The interview was carried out with the Tourism Secretary and her officer in charge of BF implementation at three beaches (IC1, IC2, IC3). However, because of its special administration regimen, Johnny Cay went through a different process of securing financial assistance to implement management actions. The environmental authority was in charge of the preparation to fulfill BF criteria, which allocated specific financial, technical and human resources to reach the goal. Table 2 shows the main actions and improvements initiated and/or implemented on each beach, according to discussions within the LBOCs and responses of the public officers interviewed.

In conclusion, according to the responses of the public officers, progress toward BF implementation has been made in all categories, except for the requirements related to beach water quality. In the same way, public officers remarked that the support obtained from local stakeholders and national institutions, motivated by the BF implementation, to improve facilities and procedures linked to safety and public services. Despite the scarcity of economic resources and the difficulty to demonstrate clear results on the beach in a relatively short time, the general perception of local authorities was optimistic about the role of the BCS in improving the beach management.

#### 4. Discussion

The initiation of the BF program by a ministry of tourism is not a common arrangement, although it has its advantages. The first is the knowledge about the state of beaches that can inform budgeting and policy-making about coastal resources used for tourism. The second is the fact that the pilot phase will use public resources to acquire experience and knowledge in terms of costs and benefits of BCS, setting an example for private and community-managed beaches to pursue (or not) the BF program. Third, all beaches willing to participate can take part in the evaluation process carried out by MCIT to identify their current status, weak points and an approximate cost for implementation of specific management actions (Botero, 2017). Perhaps the most significant advantage is the possibility of gaining access to funds and the ability to assign additional resources for the management of beaches that historically have had a small budget for this purpose, usually limited to cleaning, lifeguarding and in some cases the maintenance of most basic facilities. In Colombia, the institution that provides financial assistance is the National Tourism Fund (FONTUR by its acronym in Spanish), created to support local tourism initiatives. Because of the 'packaged' character of BF that integrates a very specific set of requirements, municipalities can use the certification blueprint to apply for resources to implement the BF award and foster beach management. In this way, significant political support for a policy can be created, given the opportunity to obtain financial resources to implement it. This notion is supported by the resource mobilization theory (Bahl et al., 1984).

The process that the MCIT had to go through in joining the program has also provided interesting findings. The relatively low response of local decision-makers to the initial call made by the ministry revealed the minor importance they assign to the management of the beaches in their jurisdiction. However, those municipalities that responded to the call rapidly recognized the importance of the BF program to accelerate their beach management efforts. Beach tourism has never been

Colombia's strong point and many municipalities do not have plans to change that. Similarly, very limited knowledge about beaches at the national level was evident, reinforced by the limited experience of Colombian institutions in managing beaches. The approval of the Decree 1766 of 2013, which creates the LBOC, for the very first time introduced the obligation of municipalities to manage their tourist beaches. The evidence indicates that the national legislation supporting beach management gives the legal basis, budget, and legitimacy to national programs or projects that foster the interest of municipalities in participating in activities that help them fulfill the new regulations. These programs also help them to overcome the limitations posed by their low capacity to execute beach management actions and long-term programs. Due to the lack of knowledge and skills in the management of beaches, the role of BF as a beach management tool can be crucial. The role of BCS as a blueprint for the management of beaches has been recognized in the literature (McKenna et al., 2011; Williams & Micallef, 2009; Zielinski & Botero, 2015). It may be insignificant in countries or localities where beaches have historically been managed by capable authorities and where there is clear legislation in place that supports beach management. Klein and Dodds (2017) carried out interviews with managers of lake beaches in Ontario, Canada, who stated that the beaches had already been meeting the standards before BF implementation, and the certification did not provide any additional benefits. In such cases, scholars can rightfully argue that the only role of BF is image building and marketing. On the other hand, researchers report that beach managers appreciate the BF standards as a clear guideline for management (Creo & Fraboni, 2011; Pencarelli et al., 2016), which is likely to be especially valuable for less knowledgeable and experienced managers, as not all local authorities have the scientific expertise to manage their beach according to integrated beach management tools and principles (Esteves, 2018). BF provides targets which should be achievable by a non-scientific group of managers with some expertise from environmental authorities (Zielinski & Botero, 2019). This has been confirmed in this study, and it is likely to be the case for many beaches worldwide, especially in many low- and middle-income countries (Kolhoff, Driessen, & Runhaar, 2018).

A low level of compliance with BF requirements was somewhat expected because tourist beaches in Colombia have been largely neglected by public authorities. However, BF has been used in several cases to raise awareness and the political and public will to face the challenges of beach management (Fraguell et al., 2015; McKenna et al., 2011; Zielinski & Botero, 2015). This paper largely confirms the role of BF as a driver for political will. At the national level, the MCIT assigned a budget to implement first examples of BF on beaches willing to participate in the program through their local municipalities, hoping to spark the interest in all coastal regions. At the local level, the BF program generated political attention that resulted in many municipalities implementing management actions directed toward reaching BF criteria, but without the actual BF application (Table 1). The 'improvements' already implemented are significant, ranging from facilities that increase the safety of beach users to environmental management actions, wastewater treatment, and environmental education activities. According to the respondents, if it was not for the BF, most of them would have not been implemented. According to Post et al. (2010), binding statements or specific actions demonstrate commitment, which is one of four building elements of political will.

Indirectly, the BF program pressures governmental agencies into taking specific actions of general interest (Cagilaba & Rennie, 2005) such as access roads, toilets or better parking facilities (McKenna et al., 2011), cycle paths, and pedestrian zones (Pencarelli et al., 2016). In Colombia, BF played a similar role. Table 1 shows more examples of actions taken as a consequence of this indirect pressure. This notion is supported by the literature. For example, in the 1980s the European Commission supported the BF to promote better sewage treatment in coastal municipalities (Botero et al., 2014). Similarly, Creo and Fraboni (2011) stated that wastewater treatment plants were installed and solid

waste management plans implemented only to comply with BF requirements. In the same way, the management of the majority of the pilot beaches in Colombia initiated actions toward beach management that introduced several improvements to organization, safety, environmental management, and education, although the final result will be visualized in the years to come. This demonstrates that BF requirements indirectly impose actions that are either centered on enforcing regulations or providing additional social or environmental benefits in line with public policy (e.g., environmental management, education, economic development etc.). Consequently, BF can play the role of a commonly perceived, potentially effective policy solution, which is another building element of political will (Post et al., 2010).

Similarly to many Latin American countries that designed their own beach certifications through national standardization organizations or ministries of tourism, Colombia used the former to create NTSTS 001–2 (ICONTEC, 2006, 2011, 2015). However, unlike BF, which is well-established and implemented in thousands of beaches, many Latin American modern certifications were designed to meet higher standards by taking on board the criticism that BF had received. In consequence, they turned out to be very challenging to implement, largely because of their technical complexity and the extensive budget needed to comply with the requirements (Zielinski & Botero, 2015). Despite various attempts, Colombia has not been able to implement the certification on a single beach and opted for BF instead. This failure can also be attributed to many mistakes made in the process (Botero et al., 2014). In the Latin American context, the interest in pursuing BF is high as many national BCS either failed or demonstrated a low rate of uptake. Because the value of a certification is largely dependent on its acceptance by the industry (Font, 2002), BF plays an important role in the region. Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic have already joined the program. Currently, Chile, Argentina, Ecuador and Curacao are at different stages of BF initiation at a national level (Personal communication, November 2019).

This paper argues that BF implementation at a municipal level requires maintenance of the interest and active involvement of institutional, private and community stakeholders in LBOC. Communities are the main stakeholders in beaches in Colombia and in many low and medium-income countries. If they assume the role of initiators of the process of pursuing BF and are equally involved in the decision-making, the implementation is more like to succeed, as shown by many community-based tourism initiatives around the world (Zielinski, Kim, Botero, & Yanes, 2020). The main challenge, however, is the maintenance of political interest regardless of the changes in power. As previously pointed out, once in place, the BF program creates expectations of continuity, securing funding for maintenance. In terms of the Colombian case presented in this paper, the follow-up assessment is planned to be carried out in a few years. In the end, the implementation of BF should show whether BCS are useful tools to trigger long-term beach management, as many authors have pointed out (Botero et al., 2014; Cagilaba & Rennie, 2005; Williams & Micallef, 2009; Zielinski & Botero, 2015, 2019).

## 5. Conclusions

Several papers have studied BF implementation from different perspectives and on geographical scales. However, this is the first paper that describes the process and challenges faced by a country initiating BF at the national level. The Colombian case is an example to visualize the management actions generated by a beach certification and political support to facilitate funding and beach management. Despite the failure to implement the national beach certification, the Colombian government pursued BF employing more participative and voluntary approaches involving local communities, private stakeholders and municipalities that expressed their interest in pursuing the certification. Despite relatively low compliance levels, the LBOC, created to manage the beaches, demonstrated their openness to a variety of institutional,

private and civil society stakeholders showing a considerable level of engagement in environmental management, improvement of safety, security, and services.

As shown by the results of the interviews, the initiation of the BF implementation process was able to generate interest among local stakeholders and political will from local municipalities that volunteered to participate in the program. This ability of BCS to gather political support for beach management is perhaps one of the most overlooked strengths of ecolabels applied in areas of intensive public use such as beaches. It is further argued that the political support for certification and consequently maintenance of already certified beaches is a strong argument for a steady beach funding, regardless of the changes in the political agenda. Whether this is to be the case in Colombia is yet to be seen. The follow-up study will assess the specific improvements BF has made to the beaches as well as the local political situation and level of support received from municipalities and other stakeholders that are part of LBOC.

The contribution of this research to the tourism practice and coastal management centers on demonstrating that BF (a tourism ecolabel) is clearly linked to the political will. The authors argue that BF is capable of raising political will, which opens up an important venue to foster beach management. The case study presented in this paper is based on information from several coastal municipalities, where public institutions, private stakeholders and civil society organizations worked together through several different arrangements, but always toward the goal of implementing BF. Perhaps this contribution is not as valuable for countries with a well-developed 3S tourism, as it is for countries interested in improving their beach management outputs through a relatively simple-to-implement blueprint. Therefore, the experience presented in this paper could be particularly relevant for countries and territories that are currently initiating BF, such as Chile, Argentina, Ecuador, and Curacao (Personal communication, November 2019).

This study covers a very wide geographical area, with eight municipalities separated by thousands of kilometers, located in four coastal zones of two oceans. Given that the vast majority of studies on BF cover small areas of hundreds of kilometers at most, this research has demonstrated that BF triggers political support independently of location and political ties between municipalities. Lastly, this paper calls for more empirical evidence in the area of tourism ecolabels. Beach certifications offer a much lower level of complexity than most theoretical beach management models proposed in the literature, but ironically, they are often evaluated against frameworks that rarely see practical uptake. The evidence from Colombia shows that beach certification can be an effective tool for beach management, especially in countries without a solid coastal tourism strategy.

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## Specific contribution of the authors:

Camilo M. Botero: Concept of the paper, methodology, data collection, data analysis, first draft.

Seweryn Zielinski: Introduction, literature review, data analysis,

discussion, and final draft.

## Appendix A. Blue Flag beach criteria 2018 (Blueflag.org, 2019)

### A.1. Environmental Information and education

1. Information about the Blue Flag Programme and other FEE eco-label must be displayed.
2. Environmental education activities must be offered and promoted to beach users.
3. Information about bathing water quality must be displayed.
4. Information relating to local eco-systems, environmental elements and cultural sites must be displayed.
5. A map of the beach indicating different facilities must be displayed.
6. A code of conduct that reflects appropriate laws and/or regulations governing the use of the beach and surrounding areas must be displayed.

### A.2. Water quality

7. The beach must fully comply with the water quality sampling and frequency requirements.
8. The beach must fully comply with the standards and requirements for water quality analysis.
9. Industrial, waste-water or sewage-related discharges must not affect the beach area.
10. The beach must comply with the Blue Flag requirements for the microbiological parameter *Escherichia coli* (fecal coli bacteria) and intestinal enterococci (streptococci).
11. The beach must comply with the Blue Flag requirements for physical parameters.

### A.3. Environmental management

12. The local authority/beach operator should establish a beach management committee.
13. The local authority/beach operator must comply with all laws and/or regulations affecting the location and operation of the beach.
14. Sensitive areas must be managed.
15. The beach must be clean.
16. Algal vegetation or natural debris must be left on the beach.
17. Waste disposal bins/containers must be available at the beach in adequate numbers and they must be regularly maintained.
18. Facilities for the separation of recyclable waste materials must be available at the beach.
19. An adequate number of toilet or restroom facilities must be provided.
20. The toilet or restroom facilities must be kept clean.
21. The toilet or restroom facilities must have controlled sewage disposal.
22. There must be no unauthorised camping or driving and no dumping on the beach
23. Access to the beach by dogs and other domestic animals must be strictly controlled.
24. All buildings and beach equipment must be properly maintained.
25. Marine and freshwater sensitive habitats (such as coral reefs or sea grass beds) in the vicinity of the beach must be monitored.
26. A sustainable means of transportation should be promoted in the beach area.

### A.4. Safety and services

27. Appropriate public safety control measures must be implemented.
28. First aid equipment must be available on the beach.
29. Emergency plans to cope with pollution risks must be in place.
30. There must be management of different users and uses of the beach

so as to prevent conflicts and accidents.

31. There must be safety measures in place to protect users of the beach and free access must be granted to the public.
32. A supply of drinking water should be available at the beach.
33. At least one Blue Flag beach in each municipality must have access and facilities provided for the physically disabled.

## Appendix B. Items of the Blue Flag readiness matrix

### B.1. Environmental information and education

1. Are environmental education activities carried out on the beach?
2. If there are sensitive natural areas near the beach, are visitors informed about their characteristics and forms of protection?
3. Is there an environmental interpretation center on the beach or in the municipality?
4. If strategic coastal ecosystems or cultural areas are located close to the beach, are visitors informed about their characteristics and forms of protection?
5. Is there information about underwater natural areas near the beach (e.g., coral reefs or seagrass meadows)?
6. Are there citizen, student or similar groups that carry out marine ecosystems' conservation activities?
7. Is there an information panel at the entrance of the beach with a map of the available services, natural areas and safety recommendations?
8. Is there a code of conduct for the beach, which is clearly displayed to the public?
9. Are there rules and regulations for the use of the beach?

### B.2. Water quality

10. Is beach water quality monitored regularly?
11. If there are river discharges (rivers, streams) directly or close to the beach, is their water quality monitored?
12. In case of monitoring of the bathing water quality, does the laboratory that carries out the analysis have national accreditation?
13. In case of monitoring of the bathing water quality, are the records from the last four years available?
14. If there are pluvial (rainwater) or sanitary (wastewater) discharges directly or close to the beach, is their water quality monitored?
15. If there are industrial facilities near the beach, are they monitored for signs of contamination or generation of an impact on the coastal environment?
16. Is there a treatment of wastewater discharged near the beach?
17. Are the microbiological water analyzes performed according to the evaluation of the 95th percentile?
18. Is it ensured that the beach stays below the limits of 250 CFU / 100 ml of fecal coliforms?
19. Is it ensured that the beach stays below the limits of 100 CFU / 100 ml of fecal Enterococci?
20. Is it ensured that the beach stays within the pH range between 6 and 9?
21. Is it ensured that the beach is free from floating oils and debris?
22. Is it ensured that there is no noticeable variation in transparency, colour or turbidity of the water?

### B.3. Environmental management

23. Is there a Local Beach Committee or a similar figure that carries out activities for the integrated management of the beach?
24. Is there a management plan for the beach or the coastal area?
25. If natural protected areas are located close to the beach, are they taken into account in the management of the beach?
26. If the beach is urban, is it included in the local Solid Waste Management Plan?

27. Is the beach and its surroundings (e.g., broadwalk, parking lots) cleaned regularly?
28. If case of regular cleaning, is an appropriate method used?
29. If there are sea turtle nesting zones on the beach, are they included in the plans and specific beach management actions?
30. If algae and/or plant debris appear on the beach, are they left on the beach unless they become a sanitary hazard?
31. Are the vegetal residues collected on the beach disposed in an environmentally friendly way?
32. Is there a sufficient number of adequate waste bins on the beach?
33. Is the frequency of collection of waste adequate for the type of the beach and the rate of accumulation?
34. Are the waste bins designed to separate at least three types of materials?
35. Is the frequency of collection of recyclable waste on the beach adequate and sufficient?
36. Is the number of toilet units sufficient for the maximum number of visitors? Are the units equipped with basic facilities such as toilet, sink, soap and towel?
37. Are the toilet units on the beach clean and in good condition?
38. Is the cleaning frequency of the toilet units sufficient?
39. Is it documented how the collection, treatment and disposal of the waste generated in the toilet units is carried out?
40. Are there any restrictions on driving on the beach?
41. Is there any regulation for camping on the beach?
42. If events are held on the beach that allow vehicles or camping, is their environmental impact controlled?
43. Is there a parking area for emergency vehicles near the beach?
44. Are there any restrictions for pets on the beach?
45. Is there a plan or strategy for the control of stray or lost animals on the beach or its surroundings?
46. Is there any regulation, project or procedure for the maintenance of the infrastructure on the beach front?
47. Is there any regulation or environmental management protocol for the maintenance of infrastructure on the beach?
48. If there is any construction under development or planned on the beach, are there measures to manage their environmental impacts?
49. If coral reefs or seagrass beds are found less than 500 m from the beach, are there special management strategies in place for them?
50. Is there a monitoring of coral reefs or seagrass beds close to the beach?
51. Are environmentally friendly means of transport promoted on the beach?
52. Is there a mobility or traffic plan for vehicle access to the beach?
53. Are environmentally friendly means of transport promoted directly on the beach?

#### B.4. Safety and services

54. Is there an evaluation or a beach risk management plan?
55. Are there lifeguards on the beach during the season of tourist influx?
56. Are the lifeguards on the beach nationally or internationally certified?
57. Do the lifeguards wear easily identifiable uniforms?
58. Is the lifeguarded area defined?
59. Is there adequate equipment for the lifeguards on the beach?
60. Is the lifeguard service schedule defined and displayed to public?
61. Is the safety flag code displayed to public and explained?
62. Is there first aid equipment and personnel trained to use it on the beach?
63. Does the map indicate the location of the first aid equipment?
64. Are there emergency plans for water pollution accidents that link community participation?
65. Is the beach emergency plan in line with local and departmental risk management plans?

66. Does the emergency plan include a mechanism for informing the public in case of pollution accidents on the beach?
67. Does the emergency plan include spill cleanup actions?
68. Does the emergency plan define the role of local people?
69. Is there an annual simulation of pollution accidents on the beach?
70. Are there emergency telephones on the beach that are clearly marked with signs?
71. Are there management measures to avoid conflicts between user groups that use the same area on the beach?
72. Has the zoning of different uses on the beach been implemented (buoys, signs, other)?
73. Are there any conservation / nature protection groups consulted regularly about the species and sensitive areas on the beach?
74. Is the zoning of the beach indicated on a map accessible to visitors?
75. Are there measures to ensure that access to the beach is safe?
76. Are there measures that guarantee that anyone can freely enter the beach?
77. Is there any surveillance on the beach?
78. Do the guards have a level of training according to their functions on the beach?
79. Are the guards easily identifiable?
80. Are there drinking water supply points for visitors, which are also protected from animals?
81. Are there access points on the beach for people with physical disabilities (e.g., ramps, walkways)?
82. Are the toilet units adapted for people with physical disabilities?
83. Are there aquatic elements for people with physical disabilities (e.g., amphibious chairs, floating platforms)?
84. Are there access points to the beach bathing area with elements for people with visual disabilities?
85. Are organizations of people with disabilities consulted about the effectiveness of access, infrastructure and equipment designed for these groups?
86. Do the access points and elements for disabled people comply with national and international standards?
87. Are there parking areas near the beach exclusively for people with disabilities?

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