

Study on the American Implementation of the Blue Flag Program in Galveston, Texas

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February 2021

[Summary of Project](#)

R.A. Apfel Beach (aka East Beach), managed by Galveston Island Park Board of Trustees (aka the Park Board) is one of four pilot beaches chosen for the implementation of the Blue Flag pilot

program, headed by the American Shore and Beach Preservation Association (ASBPA), in the United States. The Blue Flag program is an international awards program promoting environmental education, safety and security, environmental management, social responsibility, and responsible tourism among beach visitors, and has been implemented in 46 countries. The Blue Flag is an international program that began in France in 1987. Starting with observations of currents, and an interest in pollution, the Blue Flag program grew into an eco-award with criteria for beaches and marinas. The program is used to promote environmental education and safety systems to reduce the impact of human activity on beaches, marinas, and boating operations. Tourism is a highly competitive industry and Galveston is interested in visitor perception of the Blue Flag program as a differentiator for discerning travelers. The purpose of this project is to understand the public outlook on the program and the factors that influence beach visitation to determine if the Blue Flag program positively impacts beach visitation. The research gathered during the project will aim to understand Texas beach visitors' perceptions and values concerning beach conservation and environmental quality. Understanding such perceptions will help to determine if the Blue Flag program is effective in promoting a positive impact to visitation to the Texas beach. The program is in stage 4, where the criteria for the program is adapted to the regional concerns such as environmental, social, and institutional framework, and stage 5 which is the Pilot Phase, where the selected beaches become Blue Flag beaches, is due to begin in April and will be conducted (implemented) on one of their visitor beaches named East Beach.

Deliverables

This project will identify visitor interests and perspectives of Galveston beaches and the reasons for visitor engagement with and choices of beach visitation. The ethnographic data will provide a summary of Texas beachgoers' views on the Blue Flag initiative. Local interest and perspectives among partners such as Galveston Island Nature Tourism Council, Artist Boat, and the American Bird Conservancy will be included along with day trip visitors for a local understanding of the Blue Flag Program. Data has been gathered on the European implementation of the program. In addition, I will compare my results against the provided Italian analysis of the Blue Flag program to consider similarities and differences between European and American values about beach conservation.

This project will answer questions such as:

- Do visitors know about the Blue Flag Program?
- How does the implementation of the Blue Flag program affect beach visitors' perceptions of the beach?
 - What do people like or dislike about the beach?
 - Is the presence of lifeguards important to you in selecting a beach?
 - How do you view the water? Is it clean or dirty to you?
 - Does the beach appeal to you? Is it too dirty or is it clean?
 - Is water quality important to you?
- How does the program influence visitors' choices about beach visitation?
- How do visitors value beaches that have the Blue Flag?
- What types of criteria do visitors look for in beach management? And does Blue Flag fulfill that criteria?
- What do beach visitors really care about in relation to their beaches?

- Why do visitors choose a particular beach over others?
- What types of visitors attend the beaches?
 - Demographic factors such as age, socioeconomic status, racial/ethnic identity, gender, and residence.
 - Factors such as reason for visiting beach, resident or visitor, repeat visitor or new visitor.

The culmination of the project will provide the Park Board with an understanding of visitor values and concerns regarding the criteria that make up the Blue Flag (award) program. The research will provide the Park Board with the necessary information to determine whether the program influences beachgoers to visit their beaches. It will provide preliminary data to help with future research for determining if the program is considered successful enough to implement on other beaches on the island and possibly across the country.

The research results will be presented to the Park Board in the format of:

1. Written report of study with detailed qualitative analysis of data as well as conclusions of visitor perceptions based on research gathered. The findings will provide an overview of visitor perspectives so that a decision on expanding the Blue Flag initiative will be better informed.
2. Presentation of the findings of the study to the Beach Maintenance Advisory Committee and those who will be involved in the Blue Flag initiative.
3. Presentation of the findings of the study may occur at the American Shore and Beach Preservation annual conference in New Orleans.

Project Design

Stage One: Initial Project Presentation

This stage will commence with an introductory presentation of my project and research to the leadership team of the Park Board and the Beach Maintenance Advisory Committee which represents partners in Galveston who have a vested interest in the beaches, tourism, and the Blue Flag Initiative. The presentation will familiarize the project team members with me and my role in the program, while allowing me to become better acquainted with the team members also involved.

Stage Two: Data Collection

Stage two will begin with initial qualitative data gathering in the form of observations, surveys, and interviews of beach attendees about the Blue Flag Program. The research will be conducted during the week as well as on weekends throughout the project to include various types of beach visitors. Throughout the data collection process, periodic check-ins will update the Park Board on my progress. Data collection will be focused on the adult population and consist of:

- Observations at East Beach in Galveston
 - Observations will be made on visitors' interactions with Blue Flag information board which will provide information on the categories of the Blue Flag criteria, the length of the Blue Flag season, contact information for local, national, and international

- representatives, beach licenses and statutory permits, explanations of non-compliance or what it means to not be flying the Blue Flag. Observations will also be made of interactions with beach environment, and on general sites of visitation after beach attendees have left, to understand pollution of the environment.
- Surveys at East Beach
 - Surveys will be provided for visitors to answer questions such as those listed above. The surveys will preferably be in both English and Spanish due to population variation on Texas Beaches. Surveys aim to understand visitor perceptions and interest in beach management and the Blue Flag Program.
 - Interviews at East Beach
 - Ad hoc and longer interviews of a few visitors will be part of the data gathering hoping to educate visitors on the Blue Flag program and receive feedback on their perceptions. Interviews will aim to understand visitor interest in the program and visitor values in relation to environmental protection of the beach.
 - Data collection will focus on target populations such as passersby, diverse populations, and sampling methods such as purposive sampling, snowball sampling, and voluntary response sampling. Information about the program including the history of the Blue Flag, where it came from, its purpose as a standard of environmental quality, and its current pilot phase in the United States will be provided to guests before being asked about surveys and interviews to ensure that they are well-informed about the Blue Flag Initiative.

Stage Three: Data Prep and Final Analysis

Stage three will contain the preparation of data for the final analysis. This stage will primarily focus on analyzing data with periodic check-ins with committee members and the Park Board to discuss project progress and findings. Data prep will consist of transcription, sorting, and coding of data in preparation of analysis. Analysis will include organization and conclusions of data. This stage will include comparisons between data gathered in Galveston, and data gathered during the European implementation to understand international variations of visitor reactions.

Stage Four: Paper Report and Presentation of Research Findings

The final stage will be the formulation of the research findings into a paper that will be given to the committee along with a presentation of the findings. Once presented, the paper and the presentation will become the property of the committee to use for future research or reference.

Timeline

The project will take place between May and August 2021. Possible dates are May 15th through August 30th.

Phase	May	June	July	August
Initial Project Presentation				
Data Collection and check-ins				
Data Prep and Final Analysis				
Final paper report and presentation				

Researcher Background

Kristin Butler received her Bachelor's degree in Anthropology from Texas State University in 2017 with minors in Art History and Criminal Justice. While earning her degree, she volunteered at the Witte Museum in San Antonio where she recorded and packed artifacts for storage due to museum renovation. She began earning her Master's in Anthropology at the University of North Texas in 2019 where she took part in qualitative research for the Perot Museum in Dallas, which was used to determine an exhibit's success. In addition, she attended field school hosted by the Texas Archeological Society in Palo Duro Canyon where she learned field survey and excavation methods. Her current focus on environmental anthropology prepares her for studying human relationships with the environment and her ethnographic training gives her a basis for researching such a relationship.