

Blue Flag status awarded to SA's top beaches, boats and marinas

7 October 2016

Fifty-eight Blue Flags will be proudly flown at coastal sites around South Africa over the forthcoming 2016/17 South African Blue Flag season, which opens officially on 1 November. This was announced by the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) at the national Blue Flag launch event that was held at Marina Beach on KZN's South Coast today.

Earlier this year applications for the prestigious Blue Flag eco-label were reviewed by a rigorous multi-stage approval process involving both national and international assessments. The announcement of the 2016 International Blue Flag Jury results revealed that a total of 45 South African beaches have been awarded Blue Flag status this year, along with five marinas and eight sustainable tourism boats.

The Western Cape has achieved the highest number of Blue Flag sites, with 29 of the beaches, all eight boats and four of the five Blue Flag marinas falling in the province. KZN has nine Blue Flag beaches for the 2016/17 season. Seven beaches and one marina have been awarded this eco-label in the Eastern Cape. An additional 22 beaches across the three provinces have been given Pilot Blue Flag status – an important developmental stage for potential Blue Flag sites, during which WESSA works with beach managers towards the longer term goal of achieving Full Status. Internationally, almost 4,300 beaches, boats and marinas have been awarded Blue Flag status for the 2016/17 season.

The annual Blue Flag Awards also celebrate the sustained partnerships that WESSA has built with key municipalities around the country, who have recognised the value of Blue Flag not just to environmental management and education, but also to tourism, economic development and job creation. Their commitment to the programme is evident in the fact that 26 beaches have been on the programme for five or more consecutive years, while nine beaches have achieved Blue

Flag status for more than 10 consecutive years. Marina Beach, which provided the idyllic backdrop for the launch event, celebrates a remarkable 15 consecutive years on the programme this year. Humewood Beach in Port Elizabeth along with Grotto Beach in Hermanus has participated for all sixteen years that the Blue Flag programme has been running locally.

The launch event was hosted by the Ray Nkonyeni Municipality (formerly Hibiscus Coast Municipality), which has seven Full Status Blue Flag beaches. The regular attendance of Minister of Tourism, Derek Hanekom, is a confirmation of government's ongoing support for the Programme, and speaking at this year's launch event he said that we have an incredible diversity of marine life along our country's 3,000km of coastline. We need to double our Blue Flag coverage to protect our natural heritage as this creates tourism and tourism creates jobs. He added that he really values the partnership the National Department of Tourism has entered into with WESSA. The project is about looking after our precious coastal resources and marks the beginning of the Working for Tourism programme. The Mayor of Ray Nkonyeni Municipality, Nomusa Mqwebu, who delivered the opening address at the event said: "Blue Flag is the ideal catalyst to improve tourism."

This year's event also marked the launch of an exciting new coastal tourism project to be managed and implemented by WESSA in partnership with the National Department of Tourism. The *Tourism Blue Flag Project* aims to improve tourism facilities and services offered at Blue Flag beaches across South Africa, while also providing youth employment opportunities. Through this project, 200 participants will be employed in the role of "Beach Stewards" and hosted by local coastal municipalities at Blue Flag sites. The participants will also receive accredited training in environmental education and practical work experience, with the ultimate aim of developing them for further employment in the coastal tourism sector (the "Blue Economy").

Says Mandy Noffke, Tourism Blue Flag Project Manager: “Blue Flag International and WESSA representing Blue Flag in South Africa are excited by this opportunity to partner with national government and to contribute both to the social upliftment of local communities as well as to the quality of our beaches.”

An exciting development in the Blue Flag programme internationally has also been the expansion of Blue Flag accreditation programme to acknowledge sustainable boating operators in the tourism industry. In the past, sustainable boating operators have simply signed a code-of-conduct with Blue Flag around operating sustainably, but now operators offering boating activities – such as bird, seal and whale watching, cage diving, recreational diving and recreational fishing – can be awarded formal accreditation if they comply with Blue Flag’s newly defined set of strict boating criteria. South Africa is at the forefront of this new development as one of only three Blue Flag member countries to have received accreditation for sustainable boating operators in the 2016/17 Season.

Since its launch in 1987 in France, the Blue Flag programme has continued to grow, not only with regard to the number of member countries and sites involved, but also in its range of expertise within marine and freshwater environments. WESSA is proud to be the national implementing partner for Blue Flag in South Africa.