

DOI: 10.13166/awsge/237357

**ACCESSIBILITY FOR PEOPLE WITH
DISABILITIES IN THE BLUE FLAG CRITERIA:
AN EVALUATION OF THE APPLICATION IN
TÜRKIYE**

**DOSTĘPNOŚĆ DLA OSÓB
Z NIEPEŁNOSPRAWNOŚCIAMI
W KRYTERIACH BŁĘKITNEJ FLAGI: OCENA
STOSOWANIA W TURCJI**



STRESZCZENIE

W badaniu przeanalizowano udogodnienia dostępności dla osób z niepełnosprawnościami na plażach z certyfikatem Błękitnej Flagi w Turcji, wykorzystując dane z 2024 roku, oraz dokonano ich oceny w odniesieniu do Kryterium 33 Programu Błękitnej Flagi. Zastosowano opisowy projekt badania oparty na danych wtórnych pochodzących z Listy udogodnień dostępności na plażach 2024. Analizie rozkładu na poziomie poszczególnych prowincji poddano 683 plaże, natomiast analizy dotyczące dostępności przeprowadzono dla 667 prawidłowych rekordów. Obliczono częstości i wartości procentowe dotyczące dostępnych toalet, wyznaczonych miejsc na leżaki i parasole, dostępnych miejsc parkingowych, dostępu do morza, pływających leżaków, wind na pomostach oraz ramp prowadzących do morza. Najczęściej występującymi udogodnieniami były dostępne toalety (71,1%), wyznaczone miejsca na leżaki i parasole (68,2%) oraz dostępne miejsca parkingowe (67,9%). Dostęp do morza odnotowano na 58,0% plaż i był on zapewniany przede wszystkim za pomocą pływających leżaków (51,6%). Rampy (9,0%) oraz windy na pomostach (0,7%) występowały znacznie rzadziej. Na 42,0% analizowanych plaż nie odnotowano żadnego z badanych systemów dostępu do morza, przy czym poziom zapewnienia dostępności różnił się pomiędzy poszczególnymi prowincjami. Wyniki wskazują, że podstawowe udogodnienia są znacznie bardziej rozpowszechnione niż rozwiązania zapewniające bezpośredni dostęp do wody. Poprawa dostępności wymaga zatem zapewnienia ciągłej i bezpiecznej trasy od miejsc parkingowych do morza, zróżnicowania systemów umożliwiających dostęp do wody oraz regularnej kontroli ich zgodności z wymaganiami technicznymi i użyteczności.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

Błękitna Flaga, turystyka dostępna, dostępność plaż, osoby z niepełnosprawnościami, systemy dostępu do morza, Turcja

ABSTRACT

This study examines accessibility facilities for people with disabilities at Blue Flag beaches in Türkiye using 2024 data and evaluates them under Criterion 33 of the Blue Flag Programme. A descriptive secondary-data design was applied to the Beach Accessibility Facilities List 2024.

Province-level distributions were examined for 683 beach records, while accessibility analyses used 667 valid records. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for accessible toilets, designated sun lounger and parasol areas, accessible parking spaces, sea access, floating sun loungers, pier lifts, and ramps extending into the sea. Accessible toilets (71.1%), designated sun lounger and parasol areas (68.2%), and accessible parking spaces (67.9%) were the most common facilities. Sea access was reported at 58.0% of beaches and was mainly provided through floating sun loungers (51.6%); ramps (9.0%) and pier lifts (0.7%) were rare. No examined sea-access system was available at 42.0% of beaches, and provision varied across provinces. The findings show that basic facilities are more widespread than direct access to the water. Improving accessibility therefore requires a continuous route from parking areas to the sea, diversified sea-access systems, and regular checks of technical compliance and usability.

KEYWORDS

Blue Flag, accessible tourism, beach accessibility, people with disabilities, sea-access systems, Türkiye

INTRODUCTION

Participation in tourism forms part of the right of people with disabilities to engage equally in cultural life, recreation, leisure, and sport. However, tourism environments, transport, information systems, and recreational facilities may restrict participation when diverse needs are overlooked. Accessibility is therefore essential to independent and equal participation. International and national regulations require safe and independent access to physical environments, transport, information systems, and public services (United Nations, 2006; Law No. 5378 on Persons with Disabilities, 2005).

Accessible tourism enables people with mobility, visual, auditory, and cognitive requirements to use tourism products, services, and environments independently and with dignity through universal design (Darcy & Dickson, 2009, p. 7). Inclusion also requires their participation as producers, representatives, and

decision makers, since accessibility in one part of the travel chain cannot offset barriers elsewhere (Gillovic & McIntosh, 2020).

Research has identified accessibility barriers across accommodation, transport, travel agencies, attractions, and service encounters (Bulgan, 2015). Beach studies likewise emphasise accessible routes, nearby parking, movement across sand, adapted facilities, mobility equipment, water-entry systems, and reliable information as interdependent elements (Birdir et al., 2014; Job et al., 2023; Mayordomo-Martínez et al., 2019; Santana-Santana et al., 2021). Beach accessibility should therefore be understood as a continuous chain from arrival to water access.

The Blue Flag Programme is an international eco-label administered by the Foundation for Environmental Education for beaches, marinas, and tourism boats meeting standards on water quality, environmental management, education, safety, services, and accessibility (FEE, n.d.-a). Criterion 33 requires at least one Blue Flag beach in each municipality or local authority area to provide access and facilities for people with physical disabilities. It recommends accessibility at all Blue Flag beaches, including ramps, wheelchair-accessible facilities, legal compliance, and designated parking, while direct water access is encouraged where feasible (FEE, 2024a). The criterion therefore establishes a local minimum rather than equal accessibility at every beach.

Turkish Environmental Education Foundation (TÜRÇEV) has implemented the programme in Türkiye since 1993 (TÜRÇEV, n.d.-a). However, formal criteria do not guarantee consistent implementation, maintenance, or usability. Although previous studies have examined beach accessibility, no nationwide assessment of Blue Flag beach facilities in Türkiye under Criterion 33 was identified. This study therefore analyses 2024 data on accessibility facilities, accessible toilet locations, sea-access systems, and provincial distributions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE BLUE FLAG PROGRAMME AND ITS HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The Blue Flag is an international voluntary eco-label administered by FEE for beaches, marinas, and tourism boats. Its criteria address environmental education, water quality, environmental management, safety, services, and accessibility, with category-specific requirements for each application area (FEE, n.d.-a).

The programme originated in France in 1985 and awarded its first Blue Flags in ten European countries in 1987 after developing criteria on water quality, safety, and environmental education (FEE, n.d.-b). TÜRÇEV was established in 1993 under the leadership of Türkiye's Ministry of Tourism to implement the programme nationally. Türkiye then joined the European Foundation for Environmental Education, and TÜRÇEV began administering the Blue Flag Programme in the same year (TÜRÇEV, n.d.-a).

The programme became global after FEE began admitting non-European members in 2000 and South Africa joined in 2001. At the 2001 General Assembly, *Europe* was removed from the organisation's name, which became the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE, n.d.-b; TÜRÇEV, n.d.-a).

Its scope later expanded to new areas. Türkiye introduced the Blue Flag scheme for individual yachts in 2007 to encourage environmentally responsible management and navigation. Tourism boats entered the international programme in 2016, and Türkiye began awarding them the Blue Flag in the same year (FEE, 2016; TÜRÇEV, n.d.-a).

Initially focused on water quality, cleanliness, and safety at beaches and marinas, the programme now also covers environmental management, education and information, accessibility, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable tourism (FEE, n.d.-a). It currently applies to more than 5,000 beaches, marinas, and tourism boats in over 50 countries on five continents, serving as a global benchmark for clean, safe, and responsibly managed coastal and marine tourism destinations (FEE, n.d.-b).

AREAS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BLUE FLAG PROGRAMME

The implementation of the Blue Flag Programme for beaches, marinas, tourism boats, and private yachts is explained below.

BEACHES

Beaches are a major application area of the Blue Flag Programme. Eligible beaches must be legally designated for bathing and meet service, facility, and management requirements. Applications may be submitted by public or private operators, accommodation establishments, or national park administrations. Beaches should be open, safe, accessible, and free of charge where possible. They are assessed under four categories: environmental education and information, bathing water quality, environmental management, and safety and services. Imperative criteria are mandatory, whereas guideline criteria support further improvement. The international criteria set minimum standards, but national coordinators may adopt stricter requirements (FEE, 2024a).

Table 1 presents the groups, numbers, coverage, and types of the beach criteria. Of the 33 criteria, 30 are imperative and three are guideline criteria. All criteria related to environmental education and information and bathing water quality are imperative. Two environmental management criteria and one safety and services criterion are guidelines. Criterion 33, concerning beach access and essential services for people with disabilities, is imperative.

Table 1. Groups, Numbers, Principal Areas of Coverage, and Types of the Blue Flag Beach Criteria

Criterion group	Criterion numbers	Principal areas of coverage	Imperative criteria	Guideline criteria
Environmental education and information	1–6	Promotion of the Programme, environmental education activities, publication of bathing water quality results, and information on ecosystems and beach use regulations	6	–
Water quality	7–11	Sampling frequency and methods, analytical standards, pollution prevention, and microbiological, physical, and chemical water quality requirements	5	–
Environmental management	12–26	Compliance with legislation, beach cleanliness, waste management, sanitary facilities, protection of natural areas, maintenance of facilities, and sustainable transport	13	2
Safety and services	27–33	Lifeguard and first-aid services, emergency plans, user safety, drinking water, and accessibility for people with disabilities	6	1
Total	1–33		30	3

Source: Prepared by the author based on FEE’s (2024a) Blue Flag Beach Criteria and Explanatory Notes.

The Blue Flag award is valid only for the relevant season and is not permanent. Awarded beaches must therefore maintain the required standards throughout the season, not only during application and evaluation. Beaches may undergo announced or unannounced inspections by the national coordinator and FEE. If an imperative criterion is not met, the flag may be temporarily lowered or withdrawn for the rest of the season, depending on the violation. Thus, the Programme functions not only as a certification system but also as a continuous monitoring and inspection mechanism (FEE, 2024a).

MARINAS

Marinas constitute another application area of the Blue Flag Programme in marine and inland waters. Eligible marinas must be legally designated, provide facilities for recreational boats, appoint a programme coordinator, and permit inspections. They are assessed under environmental education

and information, environmental management, safety and services, water quality, corporate social responsibility, and community involvement. Of the 38 criteria, 21 are imperative and 17 are guidelines (FEE, 2024b).

TOURISM BOATS

Tourism boats are crewed vessels operated for tourism purposes and are assessed individually under the Blue Flag Programme. The criteria cover environmental education and information, environmental management, safety and services, social responsibility, and responsible operation around wildlife. Additional mandatory criteria apply to activities such as diving, fishing, bird-watching, and marine-animal observation. Of the 51 general criteria, 43 are imperative and eight are guidelines (FEE, 2024c).

INDIVIDUAL YACHTS

Introduced in Türkiye in 2007, the Blue Flag scheme for individual yachts is based on owners' voluntary compliance with an environmental code. Eligible yachts must be affiliated with a Blue Flag marina, use the Blue Card system for waste records, and meet requirements concerning environmental management, education, and safety. The one-year symbolic flag is not a certification and must be renewed annually (TÜRÇEV, n.d.-b).

The Blue Flag Programme's application areas differ in user groups, service structures, and assessment criteria. In line with this study's focus, the next section examines accessibility provisions for people with disabilities in the beach category.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive research design and secondary data analysis to examine accessibility facilities for people with disabilities at Blue Flag beaches in Türkiye. Academic studies on accessible tourism, beach accessibility, and Blue Flag criteria, together with documents published by FEE and TÜRÇEV, were reviewed to establish the conceptual framework and interpret the findings.

The data source was the Beach Accessibility Facilities List 2024 (TÜRÇEV, 2024). All 683 beach records were used to examine provincial distribution. The analysed variables were accessible toilets, reserved sun lounger and parasol areas, accessible parking spaces, sea access, floating sun loungers, pier lifts, and ramps extending into the sea. Sixteen records with no information for these variables were excluded from the accessibility analyses. Frequencies and percentages were therefore calculated using 667 valid records. The analysis of accessible toilet locations was limited to the 474 beaches reported to have such a facility.

Equivalent categorical expressions recorded in different forms were combined into common categories. A small number of inconsistencies between variables were also identified during data checking. Because no additional source was available to determine the correct values, no corrections were made and the records were retained. Each variable was analysed independently using the value reported in the dataset, and the inconsistencies were treated as a study limitation. Given the scope of the dataset and the study's focus on coastal and sea access for people with disabilities, the analysis was limited to Blue Flag beaches.

RESULTS

DISTRIBUTION OF RECORDS BY PROVINCE

Table 2 presents the distribution of records by province. More than half are from Antalya (51.2%), while Antalya and Muğla together account for 67.6% of the dataset. The five provinces with the most records represent 89.8% of the total. Therefore, the overall rates for Türkiye are strongly influenced by Antalya and Muğla.

Table 2. Distribution of Records by Province

Province	n	%
Antalya	350	51.2
Muğla	112	16.4
İzmir	64	9.4
Balıkesir	49	7.2
Aydın	38	5.6
Çanakkale	13	1.9
Samsun	13	1.9
Mersin	11	1.6
Other provinces	33	4.8
Total	683	100.0

Note: The term *Other provinces* encompasses Kocaeli, Tekirdağ, Bartın, Bursa, İstanbul, Kırklareli, Ordu, Zonguldak, Van, and Yalova.

AVAILABILITY OF ACCESSIBILITY FACILITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Table 3 presents the availability of accessibility facilities for people with disabilities. Accessible toilets are the most common feature, available at 71.1% of beaches, followed by reserved sun loungers and umbrellas at 68.2% and accessible parking areas at 67.9%. These similar rates indicate that basic accessibility facilities are available at comparable levels. Sea-access systems are

reported at 58.0% of beaches. Floating sun loungers are the most common system (51.6%), whereas ramps extending into the sea (9.0%) and pier lifts (0.7%) are rare. Thus, sea access depends mainly on floating sun loungers, while fixed and mechanical alternatives remain limited.

Table 3. Availability of Accessibility Facilities for People with disabilities

Facility	Available (n)	Available (%)	Not Available (n)	Not Available (%)
Accessible toilet	474	71.1	193	28.9
Sun lounger and umbrella provision	455	68.2	212	31.8
Disabled parking area	453	67.9	214	32.1
Sea-access system	387	58.0	280	42.0
Floating sun lounger	344	51.6	323	48.4
Ramp extending into the sea	60	9.0	607	91.0
Pier lift	5	0.7	662	99.3

Note: Percentages were calculated based on 667 beaches for which relevant information was available. Sixteen beaches with missing accessibility data were excluded from the calculations.

DISTRIBUTION OF ACCESSIBLE TOILETS BY LOCATION

Table 4 presents the distribution of accessible toilets by location. Of these toilets, 57.4% are located both on the beach and within the facility, 25.9% only on the beach, and 16.7% only within the facility. Overall, 83.3% are available in the beach area. Toilets located only within facilities highlight the importance of an accessible route between the facility and the beach.

Table 4. Distribution of Accessible Toilets by Location

Location	n	%
Beach and facility	272	57.4
Only beach	123	25.9
Only facility	79	16.7
Total	474	100.0

AVAILABILITY STATUS OF SEA-ACCESS SYSTEMS

Table 5 presents the availability of sea-access systems. No system is available in 42.0% of the valid records ($n = 280$). One system is available in 54.7% ($n = 365$), while two systems are available in 3.3% ($n = 22$). The two-system combinations consist of a floating sun lounger with either a ramp or a pier lift. No record includes all three systems.

Table 5. Availability Status of Sea-Access Systems

Availability status of the systems	n	%
Floating sun lounger only	322	48.3
No system available	280	42.0
Ramp extending into the sea only	41	6.1
Floating sun lounger and ramp extending into the sea	19	2.8
Floating sun lounger and pier lift	3	0.4
Pier lift only	2	0.3
Total	667	100.0

DISTRIBUTION OF BASIC ACCESSIBILITY FACILITIES ACROSS PROVINCES

Table 6 presents basic accessibility facilities in provinces with at least 10 valid beach records. The results show clear provincial differences. Antalya reported high rates for accessible toilets, parking spaces, and sea access. Mersin also showed high availability, although its results should be interpreted cautiously because only 11 valid records were available. In Samsun, accessible toilets and parking spaces were reported at 92.3%, but sea access at only 23.1%, showing that access to basic services does not necessarily ensure access to the water. All three indicators were 31.2% in Muğla. In İzmir, Balıkesir, Aydın, and Çanakkale, sea-access rates were lower than those for accessible toilets and parking. Balıkesir had the lowest sea-access rate, at 18.4%.

Table 6. Distribution of Basic Accessibility Facilities Across Provinces

Province	Number of valid records (n)	Accessible toilet (%)	Accessible parking space (%)	Access to the sea (%)
Antalya	334	93.1	88.3	80.5
Muğla	112	31.2	31.2	31.2
İzmir	64	53.1	48.4	29.7
Balıkesir	49	26.5	28.6	18.4
Aydın	38	60.5	63.2	31.6
Çanakkale	13	38.5	30.8	23.1
Samsun	13	92.3	92.3	23.1
Mersin	11	100.0	81.8	81.8

Note: As accessibility information was entirely missing for 16 records from Antalya, the percentages for Antalya were calculated based on 334 valid records.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a clear distinction between access to basic beach facilities and direct access to the sea at Blue Flag beaches in Türkiye. Accessible toilets, designated sun lounge and parasol areas, and accessible parking spaces were more widely available than sea-access systems. This pattern indicates that accessibility is generally stronger within the beach environment than at the transition between the shoreline and the water.

This finding is consistent with previous research showing that participation in tourism may be restricted by physical barriers, inadequate services, and limited accessible information (Bulgan, 2015). Birdir et al. (2014) similarly reported deficiencies in accessibility arrangements at beaches in Antalya and Mersin. However, their study was based on field observations, whereas the present study examined the reported availability of facilities in a secondary dataset. Accordingly, the recorded presence of a facility should not be interpreted as evidence of its technical compliance, operational condition, or practical usability.

Beach accessibility depends not only on individual facilities but also on the continuity of the route connecting them. Accessible parking, entrances, toilets, sun lounge areas, and sea-access points cannot provide comprehensive accessibility

when they are planned independently. Previous studies have identified inaccessible routes, soft sand, insufficient mobility equipment, and discontinuities between facilities as major barriers to beach use (Job et al., 2023; Mayordomo-Martínez et al., 2019). The findings of the present study therefore support an integrated accessibility chain extending from the arrival point to the sea.

The distribution of accessible toilets further illustrates the importance of route continuity. Although most toilets were located within the beach area, some were available only within associated facilities. In such cases, their effective use depends on the availability of a safe and wheelchair-accessible connection between the facility and the beach. Accessibility assessments should therefore consider not only whether a facility exists but also whether it can be reached and used independently. This approach is consistent with TÜRÇEV's emphasis on an uninterrupted connection between the beach entrance, toilet, sun lounge area, and sea (TÜRÇEV, n.d.-c).

Direct access to the water relied predominantly on floating sun loungers, while ramps and pier lifts were uncommon. Moreover, a substantial proportion of beaches had no reported sea-access system. This reliance on a single type of equipment may limit accessibility for users with different mobility requirements. Stamatiadou et al. (2025) similarly found that only 11% of Greek beaches equipped with access ramps provided all specified supporting accessibility facilities. The presence of such equipment also does not demonstrate that it is regularly maintained, operational, safe, or suitable for independent use. As Mayordomo-Martínez et al. (2019) indicate, the effectiveness of beach-access systems depends on their quality, maintenance, supporting services, and usability. Sea-access solutions should therefore be selected according to shoreline characteristics, topography, safety conditions, and diverse user needs.

The provincial findings also demonstrate that accessibility provision is unevenly distributed. In several provinces, the availability of accessible toilets and parking spaces was considerably higher than the availability of sea access. This confirms that access to basic beach services does not necessarily ensure access to the water. Nevertheless, provincial percentages should be interpreted

cautiously because the number of observed beaches differed substantially across provinces, and some results were based on relatively small samples.

The findings also suggest that Blue Flag status alone should not be considered evidence of comprehensive accessibility. Santana-Santana et al. (2021) similarly found that certification and award schemes did not independently guarantee minimum universal-accessibility conditions at Spanish beaches, particularly where management practices were inadequate. Compliance with formal criteria should therefore be complemented by technical inspections, maintenance controls, and evaluations of the complete user experience.

From a universal-design perspective, parking spaces, routes, toilets, resting areas, and sea-access systems should be treated as complementary components of a single accessible environment rather than as isolated facilities (Darcy & Dickson, 2009). In addition, accessibility planning should include the experiences and participation of people with disabilities. Gillovic and McIntosh (2020) emphasise that inclusive tourism requires the active involvement of people with disabilities in planning and decision-making. Technical assessments should therefore be combined with user-based evaluations.

The principal limitation of this study is its reliance on secondary data concerning the reported availability of facilities. The dataset does not provide information on route surfaces and gradients, ramp dimensions, toilet compliance, equipment maintenance, signage, staff assistance, or independent usability. Some inconsistencies between variables could not be verified and were therefore retained. Consequently, the findings describe reported provision rather than functional or high-quality accessibility. Future research should combine secondary-data analysis with field observations, technical audits, and interviews with people with disabilities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study found that basic accessibility facilities, including accessible toilets, designated sun lounge and parasol areas, and accessible parking spaces, are relatively common at Blue Flag beaches in Türkiye. However, direct access from the shoreline to the water remains more limited. Access to the beach and basic services therefore does not necessarily ensure access to the sea.

The dominance of floating sun loungers shows that sea-access options are limited. The small number of ramps and pier lifts may restrict access for users who need alternative forms of assistance. Sea-access systems should therefore be diversified according to shoreline conditions, topography, safety, and user needs.

Provincial differences indicate that accessible beach practices are unevenly distributed across Türkiye. However, because the number of beaches varies by province, the reported rates should not be treated solely as performance rankings. Technical compliance, usability, maintenance, and user experience should also be considered.

Accessibility should be evaluated at every Blue Flag beach, not only through the availability of one accessible beach in each municipality. Each beach should provide a safe and continuous route from parking areas to the entrance, toilet, sun lounge area, shoreline, and sea. Inspections should assess both the presence and operational condition of facilities.

Beach accessibility information should be publicly available in a standardised and current format. It should include accessible parking and toilet locations, route surfaces and gradients, sea-access systems, support personnel, and equipment availability. People with disabilities and their representative organisations should also participate in assessment and inspection.

In conclusion, improving accessibility requires more than installing individual facilities. An integrated approach combining infrastructure, services, information, maintenance, inspection, and user participation is essential for safe and independent beach use.

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