The Roadmap to a Blue Flag Beach and Sustainable Tourism in Miyagi

In June 2023, a beach in the Tohoku region, in the northeast of Japan, received international environmental recognition by winning Blue Flag certification. Now everyone can enjoy the beautiful sea there, preserved after the catastrophic earthquake of March 2011, through the efforts of those who love the region.

Shichigahama (literally meaning “seven beaches” in Japanese) in Miyagi Prefecture is a small town on a peninsula jutting into the ocean along the eastern coast of Japan’s Tohoku region. Surrounded by water on three sides, it is said to have got its name from its seven beaches, each with a village formed around it. One of the seven beaches, Shobuta Beach, is home to a historic bathing resort that opened in 1888, and the third ever in Japan.

Shobuta Beach is also awash with diverse types of seasonal seafood, including the finest seaweed, designated worthy even of the Imperial Household. And despite its location—just 30 minutes or so away by car from Sendai, Tohoku’s largest city—Shichigahama is ensconced in the sedate pace of rich natural beauty.

Many people enjoy not only swimming at the beach, but also engaging in marine sports such as surfing and bodyboarding; yachting and triathlon competitions are also held there from time to time. From the coast, paragliders can be seen enjoying the view of Matsushima, recognized as one of the three most scenic spots in Japan, known for its stunning archipelago scenery.

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To become a Blue Flag beach, a beach must meet 30 criteria in four areas: environmental education and information, water quality, environmental management, and safety and services. Shobuta Beach was able to obtain Blue Flag status in the space of just one year thanks to their remarkably fast-paced actions, including regular water-quality inspections, the provision of facilities for the physically disabled, and the installation of signs and making of broadcasts in foreign languages.

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Let us return our attention back to the story of Goko—who, in fact, is not from Shichigahama. He arrived in the town after the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011 as a volunteer, helping to take care of the disaster victims and their mental well-being. “I saw people sobbing as they spoke of their experiences of the disaster, and children painfully saying goodbye to volunteers. It made me want to ensure that my relationship with them would be more than just a fleeting one, so I extended my stay as a volunteer for quite a while, and we became like family,” he said.

The people of Shichigahama are still working strenuously to overcome the earthquake’s aftermath, as well as to protect and pass on the beauty of the sea. The Blue Flag that they have gained is one milestone on that journey.