

Research Article

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Can They Manage in a Sustainable Way? The Role of International Destination Awards in Beach Management

<https://doi.org/10.2478/ejthr-2022-0007>

received November 29, 2021; accepted November 8, 2022

Abstract: This study aims to reveal the perceptions of local beach destination managers about the level of sustainability in their management practices. This research puts into practice a comparative study assessing two beach destinations: Muğla, located in Turkey, which won the World Travel Award, and Algarve, located in Portugal, which is a member state of the European Union (EU) that has also repeatedly won the same award. In this context, in-depth interviews were held with tourism offices in selected destinations and qualitative data were obtained through semistructured interviews that were carried out between February and April 2020. As a study outcome, two hypotheses were elected and analysed: “the two regions’ sustainable managerial practices differ” and “no difference exists between the regions.” Both regions won the same award, but the EU Algarve destination is still winning the award, whereas the non-EU Muğla destination is not. The findings can be shared with beach destination managers to create or increase their sustainability awareness. No studies were found that compared the sustainable management of award-winning EU and non-EU beach destinations. Because of this gap in the literature, this study will add value to the literature about this topic.

Keywords: Beach destination; quality awards; qualitative method; sustainable destination management; Algarve; Muğla

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1 Introduction

Because tourism cannot be thought of without coastal activities since the middle of the 20th century (Zielinski & Botero, 2019), this has revealed the economic power of beaches and made them one of the most popular and widespread tourism attractions in the world (Dodds & Holmes, 2018; Houston, 2013). In fact, according to Houston (2013), beach tourism is the largest sector of tourism trade. Today, the precise number of tourists participating in beach tourism is not known, but the popularity of beach destinations undoubtedly brings with it some problems and causes some destruction (Roca & Villares, 2008). The increase in the number of users creates pressure on the beaches and threatens the existence and continuity of the resources (Ariza et al., 2012). This has led the management team of beach destinations to adopt a sustainable destination management approach. One of the features of successful destination management is the long-term planning and management process (Laesser & Beritelli, 2013; Risteski et al., 2012), and with sustainable policies and planning, it is possible to ensure the satisfaction of the local population as well as visitors, and to maintain the competitive position of the destination.

Although ensuring the continuity of a destination depends on the actions of all tourism stakeholders (Risteski et al., 2012; Laesser & Beritelli, 2013; Yüzbaşıoğlu et al., 2014; Pearce, 2016; Hristov & Petrova, 2018; Coban & Yildiz, 2019), the sustainable future of beach destinations depends on how well they are managed. From this point of view, the aim of this study was to reveal the perceptions of local administrators in beach destinations about the level of sustainability in their management practices. In this study, two award-winning beach destinations from two different countries were selected for study: Muğla in Turkey and Algarve in Portugal. Both were awarded a European Leading Beach Destination award by an international organisation known as the Oscars of Tourism.

These types of awards have a significant role in motivating managers to improve their services and facilities (McKenna *et al.*, 2011). Lozano-Oyola *et al.* (2019) emphasised that it is important to trust programs that encourage and reward destinations that have begun the process of continually improving their activities.

It is important to note that one of these countries is a European Union (EU) member, whereas the other is not. This study differentiates between these aspects. Based on the thought that each destination is unique, it is very important to determine which strategies and methods are most suitable for a destination (Risteski *et al.*, 2012). Finally, because of the adaptations required due to the COVID-19 pandemic and postpandemic period, the importance of receiving recognition awards for dealing with crisis and postcrisis situations is also considered. For these reasons, comparing the management of the beach destinations in two different countries that have won the same award in the same branch has important results in terms of the literature.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Beach Destination and Management

Beaches are defined as integrated coastal zone systems that include physical, natural, sociocultural, and management subsystems (Palazón *et al.*, 2016), conservation and habitats for countless species (James, 2000), and tourist attractions since the 19th century (Palazón *et al.*, 2019). There are three most important functions of the beaches are natural reserves, coastal protection, and a recreation amenity for people. Therefore, any management system should consider the integration of these three functions and, at the same time, protect the social, ecological, and economic values of the system (Ariza *et al.*, 2008).

The demand for a place to sunbathe and relax is the basic user expectation from a beach; therefore, beaches are mostly viewed as recreation areas (Breton *et al.*, 1996). Beaches have a role to play in attracting visitors who spend money for tourist activities such as accommodations and recreation, and coastal regions benefit from this (Alves *et al.*, 2014). In other words, it can be said that the beaches promote destinations.

The management of beaches, which are expected to combine coastal protection functions with environmental factors and user needs, is essential to balancing critical resources managers must also consider (Palazón *et al.*, 2016). For this reason, there have been several studies in

the literature about beach management in recent years (Sardá *et al.*, 2015; Lucrezi *et al.*, 2015; Lucrezi & Van der Walt, 2016; Palazón *et al.*, 2016; Dodds & Holmes, 2018; Palazón *et al.*, 2019). However, these studies are generally prepared with the focus of the beach itself and its management. In this study, the beach destinations are studied from a more macro perspective.

The growing trend toward beach destinations has important consequences for managers. They are criticised for their incorrect management strategies worldwide (McKenna *et al.*, 2011; Lucrezi *et al.*, 2015; Klein & Dodds, 2017), as sometimes their management is inadequate (Gore, 2007) because they focus on only one area (McKenna *et al.*, 2011; Lucrezi *et al.*, 2015). While providing ecological protection of the beaches and their surroundings, the expectation is that managers should also be able to prevent possible conflicts between the local residents and visitors, while not neglecting maintenance costs (Dodds, 2010). In other words, beach destination managers should adopt proactive management approaches that address all physical, economic, social, and environmental variables (Ariza *et al.*, 2012; Klein & Dodds, 2017). It is now agreed in the literature and in practice that successful management that wants to gain a competitive advantage must have the ability to balance all the components of the tourism sector (Perna *et al.*, 2018, p. 28).

Increasing awareness of the sustainability of beaches has led to the emergence of a number of coastal zone management paradigms. The most prominent of these are certificate and award programs. These might recognise a particular beach's water quality, waste management, lifeguard, accessibility, and so on. These recognitions are based on fulfilment of a set of criteria by management. The most well-known example of these certificates and awards is the Blue Flag. Its main purpose is to raise coastal sustainability at the local level to national levels by reaching high standards in the criteria it has determined (Lucrezi *et al.*, 2015). However, there are various criticisms about the competence of even the most well-known international representatives (Mir-Gual *et al.*, 2015; Sardá *et al.*, 2015; Fraguell *et al.*, 2016; Zielinski & Botero, 2019). Some researchers have talked about the adequacy of the award (Lucrezi *et al.*, 2015; Saayman & Saayman, 2017; Dodds & Holmes, 2018), and some have criticised issues such as inadequate scope, not being multidimensional, and being a marketing tool rather than a function of management (Lucrezi *et al.*, 2015). For this reason, the existence of awards and quality standards does not mean that there is good and sustainable management.

2.2 Sustainable Destination Management

The World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2007) defined destinations as areas defined by physical and administrative boundaries consisting of a combination of services, products, and attractions. Short-term, profit-focused destinations cause the destruction and spoiling of natural capital, which it owns, and helps the development of tourism. For a destination to maintain its competitiveness, all elements of the destination's supporting factors and infrastructure should be managed using a sustainable approach (Risteski et al., 2012).

Successful destination management is one of the key points in minimising the negative effects of tourism and maximising its benefits (Coban & Yildiz, 2019). In addition, the main task of a destination is to ensure its long-term competitiveness and sustainable development. At this point, the importance of the sustainable management of destinations emerges.

With sustainable policies and plans, it is possible to satisfy both the local population and visitors. However, it is not possible to say that there is an exact tourism policy and planning strategy for each destination. All stakeholders involved in tourism should be involved in the process to establish the most appropriate policies and plans for the destination; otherwise, there will be incomplete and insufficient applications. Various studies also emphasise the importance of involving stakeholders in successful destination management (Buhalis, 2000; Hristov & Petrova, 2018; Coban & Yildiz, 2019). In this study, the destination management perspectives of local administrators were examined.

Laesser and Beritelli (2013) mentioned three important functions of successful sustainable destination management: (1) creating and implementing a common vision for all stakeholders; (2) ensuring that stakeholders adopt long-term sustainability values and priorities; and (3) ensuring balance between the three bases of sustainability: economic, sociocultural, and environmental. Pearce (2016) supported this, and stated that the three most important goals of sustainable destination management are to serve the needs of visitors, to provide sustainable and balanced management, and to guarantee the sustainable competitiveness of the destination.

Making the destination sustainable and ensuring its continuity are elements of the management function; in this respect, the sustainable future of a destination is shaped by how it is managed. From this point, the study aims to answer the following questions:

- Is it really possible to create sustainable destination management?

- Do destinations win awards thanks to their sustainable destination management skills or do the awards enable destinations to adopt sustainable destination management?

3 Methods

3.1 Context and Data

Data were collected from two award-winning beach destinations: Algarve in Portugal, and Muğla in Turkey. The World Travel Awards, the focus of this study, were established in 1993 to acknowledge, reward, and celebrate excellence in all major sectors of tourism (World Travel Awards, 2020). The leading beach destination award within the scope of the study was given in 2011.

The first winner of Europe's leading beach destination award was Oludeniz, a destination in Muğla in Turkey. Although Oludeniz was nominated every year, it never won the award again. After Oludeniz won the initial award, the Algarve in Portugal was repeatedly the winner of the award, in 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, and 2020.

In the context of the relationship between the aforementioned award and sustainable destination management, to compare the two destinations, a meeting was held with the regional tourism managers, who were some of the main actors in both award and destination management issues.

3.2 Research Design, Field Observations, and Interviews

An exploratory and comparative research design was adopted in this study. A qualitative research approach was chosen because it required an in-depth study of the data to be able to adequately address the research questions from the perspectives of the participants (Creswell, 2013). Interviewees were selected using a purposive sampling method.

The research process included a collection of data through field observation and in-depth interviews. Between October 2019 and July 2020, the researchers made frequent observations in Portugal. As some of the researchers had been living in Algarve and other researchers had been living in Muğla, they were familiar with the selected beach destinations.

In qualitative research, generally it is accepted that between one and thirty interviews are enough for data collection (Fridlund & Hildingh, 2000), but this is dependent on the aim of the research and how many interviews explain and answer this aim. In this research, two interviews were conducted consisting of 24 interview questions each. As stakeholders, tourism boards—one from Algarve and one from Muğla—were selected to participate in the interviews and the directors of both tourism boards were the only ones answering the questions. Due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, the interview with the Algarve Tourism Board was held via the Internet, rather than in person. After preparation, the structured interview form was sent to the Algarve Tourism Board in May 2020. Due to workload, preparing for the summer season, the pandemic, and so on, answers were delayed, so the completed answer form was returned to the researchers in August 2020. For the Muğla destination, the interview with the Muğla Tourism Board took place in September 2020 as a face-to-face, 40-minute interview conducted in Turkish. To maintain consistency, the researchers performed all data collection, translation, and transcription.

3.3 Data Analysis

The researchers used inductive content analysis to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the collected data. However, the analysis process and data analysis might vary according to different ontological and epistemological assumptions and collected data sources in qualitative studies (Sandiford & Seymour, 2007, p. 725).

A second interview was recorded with a tape recorder with the permission of the interviewee. Before data analysis was performed, the interviews were imported into Microsoft Word. In this context, the transfer of sound recordings to Word formed a part of the analysis process (Ezzy, 2002, p. 60). The interviews performed during the data collection process and the observations in the relevant field were read many times and we were familiarised with the data.

The coding process, which is an iterative process, was guided by the concepts in the relevant literature of the research subject and the data obtained during the research process (Aslan, 2016, p. 110). In the open coding process, many codes were generated using a fixed comparison method because it was intended to recognise nuances in the data. Afterward, a data stack was assigned to this large number of generated codes. The selective coding and continuous comparison method aims to reveal the differences between the two destinations in depth by

focusing on the relationships between the most important codes and using both literature and data (Aslan, 2016, p. 110).

Although trustworthiness cannot be reduced to standard techniques in qualitative research (Aslan & Aslan, 2020, p. 1514), it is important in terms of the reliability of the data, the authors' academic identity in the field of tourism, the ability of the authors to conduct the interviews in a comfortable and safe environment, and ensuring the interviewees take the issue seriously (Pratt, 2008).

4 Results

4.1 Importance of Beaches

When talking about beaches as tourism specialists, there are two explanations: one of them is about our private lifestyle with beaches, and the other one is about tourism jargon in the literature. Our interviewees are the managers of tourism boards for their regions. For them, beaches also have two different definitions. As locals who live by the seaside, they both think that beaches are relaxing, resting, and recreation places. Then, as tourism specialists, the interviewees explained that beaches are important attractions. Interviewee 1 offered, "the beach is an important asset for every tourist destination, even outside the high season associated with high temperatures."

Interviewee 2 noted, "From the tourism sector perspective, beaches are the leading destinations of a country."

Portugal and Turkey are both Mediterranean countries with destinations where people can benefit from the beaches. In Algarve, temperatures are between 16°C and 30°C during the year. It is a warm region with mostly sunny days. Muğla's temperature ranges between -10°C and 40°C in a year. It is characterised by long, hot, and dry summers, with cool, wet winters. The sun and the sea are the primary reasons that tourists go to Algarve and Muğla. The Algarve Tourism Board explained the importance of beaches for them:

All the other products have been developed through the initial boost from sun and sea demand in Algarve. (Interview 1)

On the other hand, Muğla's Province Tourism Director shared these feelings:

Muğla has a coastline of 1,484 kilometres, which is the longest coastline in Turkey. I believe that places by the sea make the geography freer. So, local or foreign, people choose beach destinations to relax and have a good time. (Interview 2)

Despite many other tourism types, beaches remain the main attraction for both destinations. During the first interview, the interviewee offered:

A very recent study assesses that for the traditional tourist, and also for the residential tourist, the beach is linked to an average of more than 40% of the leisure activities undertaken by each tourist during their periods spent in the Algarve.

4.2 Management of Beaches

As a destination, beaches need some managerial care, such as cleaning, protecting, safety, service, and so on. Some beaches have visible managers, whereas some others do not. For example, in Algarve, there are no managers for the beaches. However, in Muğla, there are. Interviewee 2 explained, “Beaches in Muğla are rented to private enterprises through a tender system for certain periods by local administrations.”

Both interviewees accepted beaches as destinations, but they also considered beaches across the destination. Interviewee 2 explained:

Beaches can also be destinations on their own. However, these beaches are located in the Muğla. The success or failure of the beaches, an award it received, a negative event at the beach, etc., primarily causes the name of the Muğla. Therefore, beaches should be evaluated throughout the destination, taking into account their special circumstances. (Interview 2)

Because they think that beaches can be considered as destinations, it was questioned whether beaches needed special management or not. Interviewee 1 answered as follows:

Products are managed across the destination. Decision-making at the national and regional levels, as well as policymaking, is a complex process. It depends on the actions of multiple agents, not least of all, the private sector. There must be an equilibrium established by promotion, entrepreneurship, and strategic definition in order to successfully manage a tourism destination. At this point, beaches (sun and sea) as products, have achieved a high level of notoriety and performance. There are no steps being taking toward micromanagement in that area (Interview 1)

It can be understood from this answer that the Board also does not want to share responsibility for the management of the beaches.

Interviewee 2 addressed this as follows:

Management is a difficult task, especially in large and wide geographies. Therefore, it is important to work in coordination with

subadministrative groups. Due to the different fauna and flora that the beaches have, I think that it will be better to have separate management for the beaches. Managing beaches by expert people who understand the management of the beaches will provide healthier results. (Interview 2)

Concerning the two different destinations and two different managerial assumptions, the answers showed how the Boards’ different points of view shaped their managerial decisions.

4.3 Beach-Related Issues

When we think about sustainability, we have to think about the existing and potential problems. We questioned whether there were any problems caused by the beaches and the poor or incomplete management of the beaches. First, the interviewees were aware and agreeable that there might be problems caused by beach users, not directly by the beaches. The Boards of the districts answered as follows:

There are no possible problems directly caused by the beaches. I guess it would be more correct to say the problems that may be caused by beach users. The most likely problems with this situation are environmental pollution. However, damage to the diversity of the marine ecosystem is one of the biggest problems. For example, Iztuzu Beach in Muğla is the spawning area of caretta caretta (loggerhead sea turtles). *Caretta caretta* come to the region less frequently due to beach users (Interview 2)

Whereas Interviewee 1 was focused primarily on the issues of management, Interviewee 2 focused on environmental problems, stating:

The main issues related to beaches and tourism in Algarve can be summed up in two main areas: preservation and overdependence. First and foremost is the need to create mechanisms to protect important assets from negligent usage, from visitors, demographic and urbanistic pressure, and poor urban planning. Finally, problems due to excessive dependence from the sun and sea as the main tourist offering need to be addressed. (Interview 1)

Incorrect or incomplete management of the beaches can result in serious problems, including environmental problems, such as the loss of flora and fauna, safety and security problems, negative destination image, and so on. If all of these issues happen too close together, the beach as a preferred destination might cease to exist. Interviewee 1 explained the issues due to incorrect or incomplete management, again from a managerial point of view:

The main problems can arise due to lack of planning tools, territory management tools, lack of enforcement or implementing of measures, or even poor decisions in all of those areas can temporarily or even definitively jeopardise the efforts and funds spent to build an image and a product. (Interview 1)

4.4 Sustainability

Sustainability is divided into three parts: sociocultural sustainability, environmental sustainability, and economic sustainability. For the sociocultural environment, the point of view of the local people in the regions was focused favourably on tourism. For environmental sustainability, we were interested in the physical environment of the beaches. Finally, for economic sustainability, they were asked about the budgets for the beaches. In this case, there appeared to be three-dimensional sustainability answers.

In both Algarve and Muğla, tourists are not clients; they are guests. Tourists are always welcomed in a positive manner. Interviewee 1 explained:

In the Algarve, also in Portugal, there was always an openness and friendliness toward tourists thanks to characteristics of locals. There is always danger of urban and tourist pressure when the destination is highly sought after, but the relationship between local communities and tourists has been one of calm embracing. Nevertheless, awareness campaigns aimed at local communities, underlining the importance of tourism on the regional economy, have been underway over the years. (Interview 1)

Interviewee 2 focused on the economic benefits of tourists to the local community. Thanks to those economic benefits, the local people want more tourists. He explained this as follows:

The people of Muğla are aware of the economic return of the tourism sector to them. For this reason, tourists and locals get along very well. The people always greet the tourists with love. Turkish people are already known in the world for their hospitality. (Interview 2)

As it relates to environmental sustainability, the Boards were asked about beach users' environmental protection behaviours. Both regions have their own protection sanctions. However, the environmental issues are not limited to beach problems. General environmental protection is an issue for both regions, but especially for Muğla. About this, Interviewee 1 explained:

One fact remains the same, and it is that all sustainability is always in danger. The very simple usage of resources is always going to threaten those resources, if not well planned, implemented, and supervised. This is not a particular problem in beach goers or even solely from tourism. (Interview 1)

Interviewee 2 added:

Unfortunately, environmental awareness has not been established yet. This can turn into an incredible environmental pollution problem during the season. ... Our heavy sanctions are more in places where laws are protected. For example, it is forbidden to barbecue in areas designated as forest land and protected areas. However, in daily controls, you can unfortunately only control to some extent where a person throws the garbage in his hand. (Interview 2)

Regarding economic sustainability, the Boards were asked about their budgets for the beaches. They indicated that there are no special budgets for beaches. Interviewee 1 stated:

Beaches as part of the tourism offer are, in fact, being integrated into the sun and sea product, one of the main concerns and part of our budgetary options—mainly promotion—but, always in cooperation to ensure that all other aspects of resources preservation are observed. (Interview 1)

On the other hand, Interviewee 2 said that beaches are considered across the destination, but beaches are rented to special entities, stating:

As I mentioned before, beaches are rented on a tender basis. ... So, under the main destination, there are items spent on beaches; however, the state does not have a direct beach budget. (Interview 2)

4.5 Destination Management

In a destination management process, both regions emphasised the importance of destination stakeholders' importance. Especially in the tourism sector, from private sector to the local people's place is a key factor of success. Interviewee 1 explained this as follows:

Stakeholders have an important role for various reasons. In the public sector, stakeholders ensure the development of the destination. Different areas such as promotion, accessibilities, infrastructures, transportation, etc., are called upon in that role. The private sector has an increasing responsibility in destination management. In sum, the development of a destination should always be a joint effort. (Interview 1)

This issue is one of significant importance for Muğla as well. Interviewee 2 indicated this as follows:

Today, teamwork in every field brings success with it. ... Especially in the tourism sector, it is not possible not to include the private sector for your business. It is very important to work in coordination with hotel owners and managers. It would not be possible to involve the local people because our workforce and our biggest supporters are the local people. ... In summary, everyone living in a destination should have a say in the management of the destination. (Interview 2)

4.6 Sustainable Destination Management

It is important to be able to manage a destination, but more important is sustaining that management; in other words, maintaining sustainable destination management. Both regional Boards had information to offer about sustainability. Thus, the question about what sustainable destination management is was asked of the two Boards. Interviewee 2 responded as follows:

Stakeholder engagement is a must for a successful destination process. However, I think transparency is also very important for successful destination management. In addition to a fair management approach, knowing that each stakeholder will benefit from tourism fairly will ensure that stakeholders are included in the destination management process. A destination with coordinated management will surely be successful. (Interview 2)

From these opinions, it was understood that stakeholders are at the focus of a destination management process. However, it is important to determine and explain which stakeholders do what or will do what. The directors were asked about this issue and stated:

The concern about sustainability is not particular to any one agent or stakeholder. Nonetheless, all involved have to integrate measures into their planning in order to ensure the continuity of the tourist activity. It is a global action not an individual one. (Interview 1)

However, Interviewee 2 explained the responsibilities of stakeholders as follows:

The public sector is very influential about sustainability thanks to its responsibilities, its decision-making mechanism, and its ability to impose sanctions when necessary. While the private sector is very important for economic sustainability, it can also take part in various organisations and practices for environmental sustainability. The local people and the [nongovernmental organisations] are indispensable actors for sociocultural and environmental sustainability. (Interview 2)

4.7 Awards

Awards given to beaches are important contributors to the success of destinations. The Boards agree on the impact of awards. Interviewee 2 explained:

After all, don't even more people wonder about award-winning movies? In my opinion, tourists visiting a destination for sea-sand-sun will place the certificate and award among its criteria.... Awards are serious promotional tools. (Interview 2)

Interviewee 1 indicated that are indicators of performance for public opinion, and also to raise the level of responsibility for sustainable development. He said they are a result of sustainable planning for tourism rather than an objective, but also accepted the importance and promotional power of awards.

There are different kinds of awards that are given by public or private institutions. Blue Flag is the best known of the public recognitions. Actually, it is a certificate that focuses primarily on the environment. On the other hand, private awards can be given for a broader range of criteria. We were curious about the perspectives of the interviewees on these awards. Interviewee 1 responded:

The actual institutions behind the Blue Flag, which has a perceived image of reliability, are main stakeholders in tourism. Private awards are important as indicators of performance and work on public opinion. (Interview 1)

Interviewee 2 gave a broader explanation:

For Blue Flag, cleanliness and hygiene come to mind first. As I have read and know, this certificate also has serious critics. From a holistic point of view, is cleanliness the only criterion? Are their follow-ups and inspections done adequately? After the Blue Flag is issued, I don't know how valid it is and whether the checks are made rational. However, if I understand correctly, the criteria for private awards are set annually and voting is done again. When the evaluators are representatives of the sector and groups participating in tourism, if you do not keep yourself dynamic, I think that the reward will not be permanent. Hence, these awards encourage you to keep yourself updated, different, creative, and dynamic. (Interview 2)

4.8 COVID-19

Because the main topic of this research is awards, the interviewees were asked whether the past awards they received (World Travel Awards, Leading Beach Destination) would affect their tourism recovery after COVID-19. Interviewee 1 repeated the benefits of receiving the awards, without a

clear answer. The question was inappropriate for Muğla, as Interviewee 2 explained, because as he said Muğla's award had expired.

The interviewees were then asked whether they thought that tourists would be more concerned with contamination at the beaches postpandemic. As hygiene and sanitation are main concerns of most people, both interviewees agreed on an answer. Interviewee 1 explained:

I don't think that beaches are of a greater concern to people. ... The population will remain alert and observe proper behaviour toward their own protection and others as well. (Interview 1)

Interviewee 2 indicated that even as the disease remained, millions of people around the world have continued to swim. For this reason, he said that he did not think that much would change for beaches.

There have been many travel restrictions in place across the world since March 2020. Every country has been taking precautions to overcome the pandemic. Whereas Algarve was hopeful about their domestic market, Muğla was hopeful about European and Russian markets in their strategies. This provided insight into the differences in countries' precautionary policies and target markets.

5 Discussion

Supporting most of the articles in the literature (see Breton *et al.*, 1996; Lucrezi & Van der Walt, 2016), the primary perception about beaches is that they are recreation areas for visitors. Beaches generate an important income not only for the local people, but also for a whole country. Unfortunately, the other functions of beaches are being ignored by a large number of people, from beach users to academicians. As Ariza *et al.* (2008) addressed, if the sustainability of beaches is the primary goal, then all of the functions of the beaches should be considered.

Beach management is an important issue. There are numerous responsibilities required of beach managers, if there are beach managers. The literature argues about beach managers' adequateness (Gore, 2007; McKenna *et al.*, 2011; Lucrezi *et al.*, 2015; Klein & Dodds, 2017), but this study notes that there is no separate beach manager in Algarve.

It is understandable to consider beaches across the destination, but there are so many different branches in a destination, and these are supposed to be managed in their private fields and by their experts. In Muğla, beaches are rented to private enterprises for certain periods. The logic behind this is that it is best to have experts, who

understand the management of the beaches, manage them. The question is whether these "expert" managers are really experts in beach management. The intention is good, but there are some difficulties in realising the thoughts. Today, there are many private beaches where one has to pay an unreasonable amount of money for anything from entrance to the services in Muğla. As Aslan and Aslan (2020) stated in their research, with the enclosure movement of capital, the coastal areas reserved for the use of the people who do not pay are decreasing every day. It can be said that there are special beach managers in Muğla in theory, but has the renting out of the beaches proved to be beneficial in practice?

When talking about overuse of beaches, there are some possible problems. Some of these can occur because of the beach managers' actions or lack thereof. Some researchers have thoughts about managers' inadequateness (Gore, 2007); some researchers believe that managers focus on only one subject to the detriment of others, such as only services, the environment, the economy, and so on (McKenna *et al.*, 2011; Lucrezi *et al.*, 2015). In this research, damage of a destination's image is one of the common ideas about the problems. Additionally, environmental sustainability and security weakness topics were added. Dodds (2010) cited conflicts between local residents and visitors as possible problems. However, in both Algarve and Muğla, tourists have always been welcomed. In contrast to the literature, then, there are no such problems in the case of their sociocultural approaches. However, the results of some studies (Defeo *et al.*, 2009; Schlacher *et al.*, 2014) state that environmental sustainability concerns will always continue in both Algarve and Muğla, and this has also emerged as one of the findings of this study.

One of the issues where the research agrees with the literature is on the importance of stakeholders in destination management. Like Buhalis (2000), Coban and Yildiz (2019), and Hristov and Petrova (2018), we found that stakeholders have an ever-growing role in both Algarve and Muğla. Interviewees are accepting that every stakeholder has their own responsibility. If this sharing of responsibility succeeds, the destination will be successful. On the other hand, Muğla does not have a destination management organisation. In other words, Muğla is accepting the importance of stakeholders in theory, but not in practice. Nevertheless, Algarve has one and it seems that it is working.

Awards are one of the main driving forces to make beach destinations sustainable. In this study it was revealed that awards were seen as symbols of success. Being an awarded destination brings some advantages. There is a difference between Algarve and Muğla. Whereas

Algarve thinks that the institutions behind the Blue Flag certificate are reliable, Muğla criticises the Blue Flag for some of the same reasons as Fraguell et al. (2016), Mir-Gual et al. (2015), Sardá et al. (2015), and Zielinski and Botero (2019), who argued that receiving awards given by private organisations is more difficult and more challenging in pursuing their success. Although Algarve seems to not really care about receiving private awards, they have been awarded as a European Leading Beach Destination, which is given by the World Tourism Awards, eight times. Both destinations have been awarded many Blue Flag certifications for their beaches and marinas; however, it seems as though Algarve is receiving awards for their managerial, promotional, and operational activities.

Most countries have prepared an after-pandemic plan for recovering their tourism sector. In this study, we wondered whether Algarve and Muğla were hopeful after the pandemic, thanks to their past awards, or not. First, there can be no specific answer about what will happen after the pandemic or when it will end, until these events take place. Additionally, Muğla has no belief that its 2011 award will be helpful, because they think the benefit has timed out. Algarve is more hopeful thanks to their receiving eight past awards. They think that when a destination is getting accolades on a regular basis, it shows that there is a renewed commitment, as tourism awards are thought to be the work of everyone involved in the business, from authorities, to the private sector, the local population, and so on.

6 Conclusion

If you want to earn money from beaches, you have to protect the marine species and the physical beach environment; you have to assure the beach users of their safety and security; and you have to promote them to protect the beach environment. In this way, beach management can sustain the beach, the beach destination, beach revenue, and beach sustainability.

Our results show that creating a sustainable destination management process is a long-term process. Everyone has their own duties, but they must work cooperatively with other stakeholders if they are to succeed. Algarve and Muğla are just managing for now, but they have been trying to manage in sustainable ways. It can be said that Algarve is one step ahead. Algarve has been winning awards for years and Muğla has won the same award only once, but this might be due in part to the fact that Muğla has not yet created a sustainable destination management

system, so they have not yet won an award attributable to their sustainable destination management skills.

For Algarve, though, these awards have started to enable them to adopt a sustainable destination management process. On the other hand, Algarve's awards are not due only to their promotional activities, but also because they are members of the EU. Algarve has been winning an award called the European Leading Beach Destination, and Portugal is a European country where there is freedom of travel. Their main tourism market is Europe. On the other hand, Turkey is not an EU member and tourists are required to have a visa. So, Algarve has more advantages than Muğla in this case.

There are a few limitations of this study that should be noted. First, this study interviewed only one stakeholder from each region. Future studies should address different stakeholder groups with more interviewees. Second, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic was a significant natural limitation. After the pandemic and the next award, the two regions can again be researched to see if there is a difference in their postpandemic plans and managerial or operational actions. Third, as a private award, we focused only on the World Tourism Awards and its one branch (European Leading Beach Destination). Future studies can address another award system or branch.

Acknowledgment

This research was financed by National Funds provided by FCT, the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, through Project UIDB/04470/2020 CiTUR.

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Note

This research is based on the doctoral dissertation of Emine YILMAZ entitled “Award effect in the sustainable management of beach destinations: The case of Algarve”.

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