

Shobuta Beach, packed with people during the summer, opened for tourism in 1888.



# 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, Tohoku’s first such seaside resort and the third ever in Japan.

It was also this beach that, in June 2023, won Blue Flag certification:

an international environmental designation awarded to beaches, marinas, and sustainable-tourism boats worldwide that meet stringent criteria for water quality, safety, and accessibility. The international NGO Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE), headquartered in Denmark, is promoting the designation around the world in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

Activities promoting blue



GOKO Akitsugu comes from Murata Town in south-central Miyagi Prefecture. At the time of the 2011 earthquake, he was working some 700 km away in Aichi Prefecture, but moved to Shichigahama having volunteered to help with reconstruction efforts. After working for an NPO providing support for disaster victims, he joined the staff of the Shichigahama Town Tourism Association.

tourism, including the acquisition of Blue Flag status, are becoming popular in many parts of Japan. Blue tourism is a type of sustainable tourism that aims to protect the local environment and achieve sustainable development by utilizing the natural landscape and fisheries of coastal areas as tourism resources.

GOKO Akitsugu of the Shichigahama Town Tourism Association has been instrumental in campaigning for Shichigahama’s blue tourism. “Since Shichigahama is a seaside town, we felt that we needed to educate residents about the current state of the ocean and what should be done to protect it, and that we as a tourism association also needed to learn more. It was that thinking that fit with the Blue Flag philosophy,” he remarked.

To become a Blue Flag beach, a beach must meet 33 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.

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. 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.

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 immensely proud of their small town and do their utmost for the local community. That’s why



Top: Matsushima as seen from Mt. Tamonzan in Shichigahama. The area’s landscape, with about 260 islands dotting the sea, has fascinated people since ancient times.

Bottom: Shichigahama was formerly home to a popular summer retreat for foreigners, as famous as the forested town of Karuizawa in Nagano Prefecture. Now, the same area comprises the Shichigahama International Village, which is the town’s cultural hub where various events such as concerts and stage performances take place.

they didn’t give up when faced with the earthquake and have successfully rebuilt; that, I think, is one of the attractions of the town. I want many people to discover Shichigahama through blue tourism.”

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. ●