

Residents return home as Canary Islands blaze weakens

August 21 2019, by Desiree Martin With Daniel Bosque In Barcelona



A fire raging on Gran Canaria has subsided after officials said they feared an 'environmental tragedy'

Residents forced from their homes when a devastating wildfire erupted on the Spanish holiday island of Gran Canaria began returning Tuesday,

although firefighters were still battling to contain the blaze, officials said.

Flames as high as 50 metres (160 feet) had complicated the battle against the blaze burning since Saturday on the western slopes of the volcanic island located off northwest Africa, prompting the evacuation of several villages with a combined population of around 10,000.

But as winds fell on Tuesday, the [fire](#) was beginning to "stabilise" and residents were returning home, Canary Islands President Torres said in a tweet.

"The degree of severity we initially expected is much lower, which is very good news," Federico Grillo, the island's chief of emergency services, told reporters.

The decline in wind speeds prevented the blaze, Spain's worst wildfire this year, from entering the Inagua [national reserve](#), which is home to the blue chaffinch, a rare native bird species.

There are only some 400 blue chaffinches left. Inagua was partly destroyed in another major fire in 2007.

The flames did enter Tamadaba, a national park north of Inagua, which is considered the "green lungs" of the island that lies at the heart of the Canary archipelago, but local officials said there was less damage than initially feared.



Some 700 firefighters and other crew backed by 16 water-dropping helicopters and planes were working on controlling the blaze

Many of the pine trees in the park "remain intact", Torres told news radio Cadena Ser.

"There was a miracle last night," he added.

'Less destructive'

Some 700 firefighters and other crew backed by 16 water-dropping helicopters and planes were working on controlling the blaze, which is estimated to have destroyed 10,000 hectares (25,000 acres), according to

emergency services.

No fatalities have been reported and tourism on Gran Canaria, which is concentrated on its coast, has not been affected.

Two other fires hit the island's centre last week without causing any injuries.



Flames as high as 50 metres complicated the battle against the blaze burning since Saturday

"Tamadaba is one of the great reservoirs of biodiversity in Gran Canaria," Manuel Nogales of the Spanish National Research Council

told AFP.

The park consists of 7,500 hectares of protected area made up of valleys, slopes and mountains that are home to some 30 plant species that can only be found on the island.

While the flames spread to the eastern part of the park, an area of young pine trees, the fire was "more superficial, less destructive" in the older forests in the rest of Tamadaba, Nogales said.

'Take some time'

But Juli Caujape, the director of the island's Viera y Clavijo botanical garden said the fire may have affected "the last stretch of laurel forest" in Gran Canaria.

"Tamadaba is a hotspot for biodiversity. There are many species of plants, vertebrates, insects, fungi and microorganisms only found in the park," he told AFP.



Gran Canaria boasts breathtaking views and diverse microclimates which make it very popular with tourists

Efforts had been made in recent years to reintroduce the laurel pigeon, a species of bird that is endemic to the Canary Islands but which had disappeared from Gran Canaria, and there are fears that the fire may have destroyed its habitat, Caujape said.

Nogales said the native pine species evolved on the island's volcanic terrain and are "very well adapted to fire" so they will recover easily.

"We don't have to worry too much about the [pine trees](#). What is worrying is the rest of the species of the ecosystem," added Caujape.

"The pines will become green again soon but the rest of the vegetation will take some time to re-emerge and the majority of the fauna won't return until the ground cover is restored."

© 2019 AFP

Citation: Residents return home as Canary Islands blaze weakens (2019, August 21) retrieved 11 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-08-residents-home-canary-islands-blaze.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.