

Canada tourism fears bigger, badder wildfires coming

September 11 2024, by Anne-Marie PROVOST



In this July 2024 image, smoke rises from a wildfire burning in Jasper National Park in Canada. The wildfire devoured up to half of the main town.

Images of towering wildfires tearing through forests and leaving a national park in cinders have kept many tourists away, putting one of Canada's top industries on edge.

The nation has been ranked among the top 12 destinations worldwide for

its stunning displays of nature and cultural mosaic.

But 2023 saw megafires scorch a record amount of forests and displace 200,000 residents.

This year has been less intense with fewer fires causing much less damage, still large swathes of Jasper National Park in the Canadian Rockies were ravaged by fires, closing it to tourists and provoking a deep sadness among Canadians.

Fires swept through the park in the middle of its key summer [tourism](#) season. It usually welcomes about 2.5 million visitors each year from across Canada and abroad.

Since July, few people have been permitted to visit the area for safety reasons while popular tourist activities were suspended.

"It's catastrophic," Stavros Karlos of the Alberta Provincial Tourism Association told AFP.

Three-quarters of local businesses, including restaurants, hotels, a sky tram, and outfitters, earn more than 60 percent of their annual revenues during the summer and are now facing estimated daily losses of Can\$4.5 million dollars (US\$3.3 million).

It's unclear how long it could take this "national icon" to recover, a dispirited Karlos said.



This handout videograb provided by Park Canada shows the devastated town of Jasper following a wildfire in August 2024 that burned more than 350 of the 1,100 buildings in the town.

'Canada is on fire'

Scientists paint a gloomy future with more and larger blazes sparked by a [warming climate](#).

"When we see media headlines in other countries that say Canada is on [fire](#), that's a challenge for us," said Beth Potter, head of Canada's tourism industry association.

"We're a very big country—18 times the size of France—and one region may be dealing with an extreme event, but that doesn't mean the whole country is," she explained.

Last summer, tourism operators in eastern parts of the country faced cancellations due to wildfires more than 3,500 kilometres away in westernmost British Columbia.

"Climate change is an [existential threat](#) to Canadian tourism" and the nation's reputation, Tourism Minister Soraya Martinez Ferrada acknowledged this spring.

Experts say that wildfire smoke drifting across the border into the United States and darkening skies over New York and Washington is especially problematic as it can negatively affect Americans' attitudes toward Canada. They represent about two-thirds of [international visitors](#) to this country.



Residents watched from the water's edge the McDougall Creek wildfire in West Kelowna in western Canada in August 2023.

'An image problem'

Destination Canada, a federal agency tasked with promoting local tourism, has acknowledged that Canada is facing "an image problem" and is working to improve communications with tourists about what's happening in various regions to warn but also allay fears.

Its executive director Sebastien Dubois told AFP he would like to see visits to Canada spread year-round to lessen the tourism sector's dependence on the summer crunch season.

So far, 2024 is shaping up to be a good year, with revenues generated by international visitors to the end of July topping those in the same period in 2019, which was a record year.

Nevertheless, what happened in Jasper should be a "wake-up call for the tourism industry" and authorities, believes Karlos.

He is hoping that the government will devote more effort and resources to mitigating the risk of forest fires.

"Therefore, a new and different approach needs to be taken to fire mitigation, to protect communities, and not only tourists, visitor communities," Karlos added.

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