

Canary Islands fire that threatened protected areas subsides

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



Some 1,000 firefighters and other ground crew are battling the blaze, as well as around 15 water-dropping helicopters and planes.

A wildfire that has raged across vast areas of the Spanish holiday island of Gran Canaria since the weekend has abated as winds have dropped, limiting damage to protected areas, local officials said Tuesday.

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.

Officials on Monday feared an "environmental tragedy" because the flames threatened two protected areas but winds unexpectedly died down overnight.

"After going to the (affected) areas at night, experts tell me the fire is subsiding... and losing strength," Angel Victor Torres, president of the Canary Islands archipelago, tweeted.

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 chaffinch left. Inagua was partly burned down 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.

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



Thousands of people who were evacuated may be allowed to return to their homes

"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 12,000 hectares (30,000 acres), according to emergency services.

The people who were evacuated will be able to start returning to their homes on Tuesday, Torres said.

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

But the centre of the island, the second-most populous of the Canary Islands with 850,000 people, boasts breathtaking views and diverse microclimates which make it very popular with hikers.

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

"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. Eight of the species are endemic to the park itself, Nogales said.

While the flames entered with force in 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.

"Tambada is a hotspot for biodiversity. There are many species of plants, vertebrate, insects, fungus and microorganisms which was only be found in the park," he told AFP.

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."



Location of fires active on August 18-19 on the Spanish island of Gran Canaria

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