

# CANADIAN TOURISM FACES THE IMPACT OF FIRES



The year 2023 was marked in Canada by massive fires and a record number of burned areas. Although the damage is less significant in 2024, enormous fire that affected an iconic park still forced thousands of residents and tourists to evacuate.

Jasper Park, considered a jewel of Canada, was struck during the tourist season. The park usually welcomes 2.5 million visitors annually, including Canadians and foreigners. However, since July, many activities have been put on hold.

"The summer months are crucial in Jasper," says Stavros Karlos of the Alberta Provincial Tourism Association. "It's catastrophic," he says. He fears the park is a "national icon" and the province has lost its appeal. **Three-quarters of local businesses make more than 60% of their annual revenue during this period**, and the daily loss of income is estimated at 4.5 million Canadian dollars.

## **Cancellations due to Fires More Than 3,500 Kilometers Away**

With large areas of the park affected, the fire's impact could be felt for years to come. Scientists expect that fire seasons will be longer and more devastating in the years to come because of global warming. "When media in other countries are reporting that Canada is on fire, it's a challenge for us," admits Beth Potter, who heads the Tourism Industry Association of Canada.

"We are a vast country, and one region can be faced with an extreme event, but that does not mean the entire country is," she continues, recalling that Canada is "18 times the size of France." Last summer, tourism operators in the eastern part of the country faced cancellations due to wildfires that occurred more than 3,500 kilometers away in British Columbia."

"Climate change poses an existential threat to Canadian tourism and the country's reputation," acknowledged Canadian Tourism Minister Soraya Martinez Ferrada. This is especially concerning as fire smoke often travels to the United States, leading to several days of polluted air in some states. The impact is significant, considering that Americans represent about two-thirds of international visitors to Canada.

## **A "Wake-up Call" for the Tourism Industry**

Destination Canada, responsible for promoting Canada as a tourist destination, acknowledges that it has an "image problem to manage" but is working on implementing "best practices," including improved communication to inform tourists of the situation accurately. The industry also aims for year-round tourism, emphasizing the importance of having a steady tourist base regardless of the season, according to Sébastien Dubois, the executive director.

Although the impact is not yet felt at the national level, 2024 is showing promising signs, **as revenues generated by international visitors have exceeded those of 2019 at the same time, considered a record year since the end of July.**

The recent events in Jasper should serve as a "wake-up call" for the tourism industry and authorities, according to Karlos, who hopes the country will be able to develop a risk mitigation program to address the forest fires.

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