

Navigating Climate Change and Extreme Weather: A Case of Walt Disney World



Source: Unsplash (2024)

Background

In October 2024, the landfall of Hurricane Milton in Orlando led to the temporary closure of all four of Walt Disney World's theme parks and the Disney Springs shopping area for one and a half days (MSN, 2024). This closure was estimated to have reduced the park's annual attendance by 4%, resulting in a US\$125 million loss of net profit for Disney, excluding the cost of restoring park facilities after the storm (Deccan Herald, 2024).

As climate change intensifies, the frequency and severity of extreme weather events are increasing, presenting significant challenges to theme parks. These challenges disrupt operations and affect visitor safety and overall experience. Disney World's proactive response to these extreme weather events illustrates how theme parks can effectively manage crises and minimize disruption.

While some hotels, such as the Fort Wilderness Campground, were forced to close due to potential flooding, most hotels within Walt Disney World remained open to accommodate both reserved guests and locals who had to relocate because of the extreme weather (KHOU, 2024). Moreover, Disney kept guests informed of the situation through its mobile application, while also offering discounted rooms and meals to those needing to extend their stay (Business Insider, 2024). Additionally, cast members played a crucial role by volunteering to stay overnight, distributing lunchboxes, ensuring guest safety, dressing up as characters to comfort scared young guests, and clearing obstacles to help get the park up and running again (KHOU, 2024).

On the other hand, Disney's commitment to robust infrastructure, including reinforced power lines and backup electricity, further underscores the importance of governance in managing climate risks (The Cut, 2024). Similarly, parks have begun using more steel in ride designs to make them more durable against heat waves and other extreme conditions (CNN, 2023). Such

investments are essential for enhancing the resilience of theme parks against future extreme weather events.

Challenges

Beyond Disney's strategies, it has been suggested that theme parks could develop more indoor attractions, such as virtual or augmented reality experiences, to maintain guest engagement even during bad weather and reduce the necessity for park closures (LinkedIn, 2025). Furthermore, there is an increasing trend of theme parks revising their ticket policies in response to the frequent occurrence of extreme weather. For instance, SeaWorld has updated its weather guarantee policy to include not only rainstorms but also extreme heat, allowing guests to return on another day if weather conditions are unfavorable (Theme Park Insider, 2023).

Disney's experience with Hurricane Milton once again demonstrates that climate change poses significant risks to business operations. While the strategies implemented by Disney and other theme parks can help mitigate some of the impacts, they are not sufficient to fully protect a theme park's assets and future. This underscores the broader responsibility of companies to adopt sustainability initiatives and address the root causes of climate change (Deccan Herald, 2024).

Discussion Questions

1. What lessons can other theme parks learn from Disney's approach to accommodating guests in the event of extreme weather?
2. What role do cast members play in crisis management during extreme weather events?
3. How might Disney incorporate changes in park facilities to maintain guest engagement during adverse weather?
4. How can Disney adapt its ticket policies or pricing strategies to accommodate the increasing frequency of extreme weather events?
5. Given the increasing occurrence of extreme weather events, what other strategies can theme parks adopt in the future to combat the impact brought by climate change?

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Keywords

- Theme Park
- Extreme Weather
- Climate Change
- Crisis management
- Guest Experience
- Sustainability