

# COVID-19 Island Insights Series

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Fernando de Noronha

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The COVID-19 Island Insights Series is an initiative spearheaded by the Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law & Governance (SCELG) and the Institute of Island Studies (IIS) at the University of Prince Edward Island in collaboration with Island Innovation. The initiative brings together critical assessments of how specific islands around the world have performed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the extent to which their recovery plans can promote resilience and sustainability in the long term.

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Fernando de Noronha is one of the oceanic archipelagos in the Brazilian Sea area that is inhabited by communities and configured by urbanized landscapes.

Located 345 kilometres from the Brazilian coast (03°51'S and

32°25'W), its 21 islands are part of an underwater volcanic chain.

The main island of Fernando de Noronha has a population of about 3,100 permanent inhabitants and, since the 1980s, has experienced a large influx of tourists at certain times of the year.

#### COVID-19 data and timeline (15<sup>th</sup> March 2021)

Number of cases on the island: 586  
(18.9% of population)

Number of fatalities: 2 (0.064%)

There were three stages of openings for visitors between September 1<sup>st</sup> and December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

The two schools on the island (402 students in the elementary and high school and 217 infant students) closed on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and reopened September 9<sup>th</sup>. In 2021 schools opened under isolation protocol, but then closed once again on February 19<sup>th</sup> and reopened on March 11<sup>th</sup>.

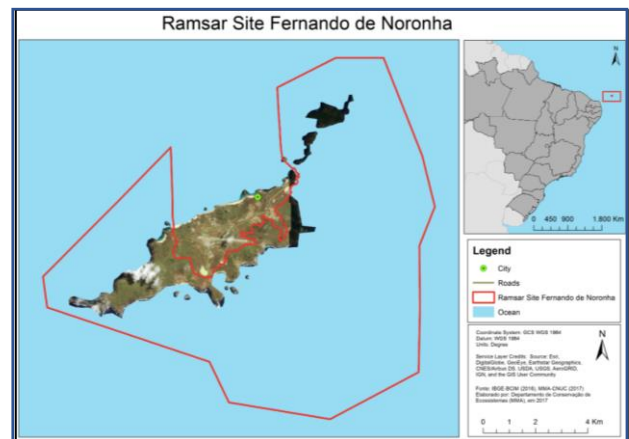
Number vaccinated as of March 18, 2021: 380 (12.25%).

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FERNANDO DE NORONHA<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [https://rsis Ramsar.org/RISapp/files/43173876/pictures/BR2333\\_map180215.jpg](https://rsis Ramsar.org/RISapp/files/43173876/pictures/BR2333_map180215.jpg)

## Fernando de Noronha – An Overview

Fernando de Noronha's *islandness* is evident both in its physical geography as well as in its cultural and political characteristics. The archipelago has an estimated population of 3,101 inhabitants<sup>2</sup>. This remote volcanic archipelago consisting of 21 islands is recognized as a World Heritage site<sup>3</sup>. Although it can be reached by air and sea, its remote location still restricts accessibility.

The archipelago has a unique, complex and hybrid governance structure in relation to the Brazilian federal pattern. Historically, its principal functions were designated by its geographical location. Different European nations landed on the island throughout the early centuries of colonization until Portugal gained control by populating it and building military fortifications in the mid-18th Century. Since then, it has served as a prison and was used by the military during the Second World War and the Cold War<sup>4</sup>. Since 1970, under strict conservation policies and regulations, tourism has become increasingly important.

The Fernando de Noronha archipelago is a state sub-district<sup>5</sup>, expected to become a municipality in the future. It is democratically fragile, due to the multiple and overlapping layers of governance and the unpopular selection of the main territorial administrator by the state government of Pernambuco. This latter position is commonly held by a representative who does not live, nor is directly connected to the island. On the other hand, there are examples of participatory management, such as the Territorial Autarchy of the State District of Fernando de

Noronha (ATDEFN), environmental committees and a seven-member District Board whose main function is to oversee the general administrative activities. Unfortunately, this Board is perceived by the local population to be powerless, "for not providing elementary public services, such as effective health care, education, waste treatment and collection; and the latter for failing to put in place real action to oppose or make valid popular claims through its legal powers and duty"<sup>6</sup>. It is also known that urbanization on the main island took place in a disorderly manner, due to the lack of regulatory instruments for use, occupation and buildings<sup>7</sup>. The outcome of this process has led to environmental and health problems. Furthermore, the archipelago is dependent on fossil fuels for the generation of electricity and transportation, contradicting the principles of international biosphere heritage, its designation as a national protected area, and adversely affecting the local economy<sup>8</sup>.

Fernando de Noronha is a federal territory in a federal water zone and is dominated by environmental protected areas. Its administrative status officially changed to the Pernambuco's district in the late 1990s. The territorial decentralization doctrine is a constitutional principle of federal governance, but the mechanisms to achieve self-determination and effective, democratic, and sustainable goals in the archipelago have not been implemented for the past three decades. This explains the current Brazilian President's intentions, as publicly announced, to return the archipelago's administrative status to federal control<sup>9</sup>, under the premise that it could achieve better performance of the tourism economy. Since Pernambuco's Constitution has not yet fully reached its

<sup>2</sup> IBGE, 2021, <https://www.ibge.gov.br/cidades-e-estados/pe/fernando-de-noronha.html>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1000>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/turismo/2019/02/territorio-estrategico-fernando-de-noronha-ja-foi-presidio-e-base-militar.shtml>.

<sup>5</sup> Constitution of the State of Pernambuco. [https://www.pe.gov.br/\\_resources/files/\\_modulos/files/files\\_105\\_201111171514476bd8.pdf](https://www.pe.gov.br/_resources/files/_modulos/files/files_105_201111171514476bd8.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Reis & Hayward, 2013, <https://www.islandstudies.ca/sites/islandstudies.ca/files/ISJ-8-2-2013-Reis+Hayward.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Andrade, et al., 2009, <https://seer.sis.puc-campinas.edu.br/seer/index.php/oculum/article/view/353/333>.

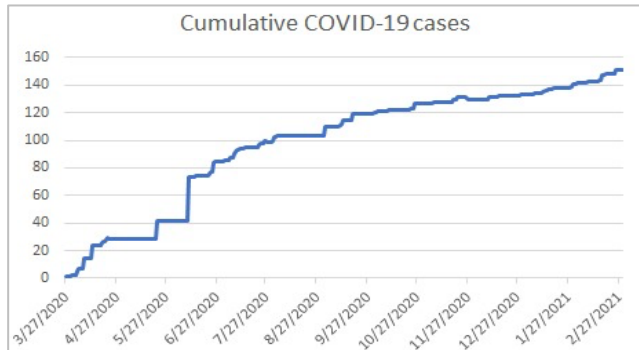
<sup>8</sup> Silveira, et al., 2015, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1876610215013326>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.terra.com.br/noticias/brasil/bolsonaro-defende-federalizar-fernando-de-noronha-para-ampliar-turismo,045ebec510a99f65eda060adf7ab2dfa98vpgflu.html>.

democratic goal of decentralization, the governance process is being interrupted rhetorically by presidential pronouncements. Considering the increased importance to achieve sustainable principles and realize the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) global agenda, the current central question for residents of the archipelago is how to face the challenges and opportunities that the COVID-19 pandemic presents, including how to reform the governance structures that reveals itself weakly democratic resulting from the current period of exceptional authoritarian management.

### COVID-19 on Fernando de Noronha and control measures

In Fernando de Noronha, the first case of COVID-19 was recorded on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020,<sup>10</sup> and the first death as a result of COVID-19 occurred on January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021.<sup>11</sup>



The only local inhabitant death was confirmed<sup>12</sup> on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2021 following the increase of infected cases of residents during the period from January to February 2021. Of the total of 586 cases to date (March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021), there have been 2 deaths, 556 inhabitants have recovered and 27 remain in quarantine or hospital treatment.

<sup>10</sup> <https://noticias.uol.com.br/cotidiano/ultimas-noticias/2021/01/22/fernando-de-noronha-confirma-a-primeira-morte-por-covid-19.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Source <https://brasil.io/dataset/covid19/boletim/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://g1.globo.com/pe/paranaguaba/blog/viver-noronha/post/2021/02/26/moradora-de-noronha-viaja-para->

Fernando de Noronha was closed to visitors on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020, and on April 5<sup>th</sup> Island residents who were on the mainland were prevented from returning. It wasn't until June 13<sup>th</sup> that they were allowed to return to their homes, first on fortnightly flights and then weekly, following a protocol established by health authorities and the State.

In order to educate the population about the public health precautions for everyday activities the archipelago administration published a manual that depicted physical distancing, basic sanitary habits, appropriate behavior in public spaces, drugstores, markets and gas stations, as well as how individuals should practice sports, fishing, and work safely. Schools started to reopen in September 2020 and continued to reopen gradually through February 2021. The use of masks and proper hand hygiene was required, students' temperatures were taken, and the distance between chairs was increased<sup>13</sup>.

### Socioeconomic impacts

The pandemic control protocol has multiple components involving civilian and military police enforcement, health agencies, and campaigns with stakeholders. The main element is the requirement for RT-PCR exams for anyone who wishes to travel to the island, regardless of whether they are residents, workers or tourists. However, the results of the tests were often not available prior to a person arriving and circulating on the island, resulting in several positive cases for those travelers already on the island. For such patients, individual home isolation was enforced. For those already infected, presenting proof of a positive result of a prior infection was sufficient to gain entry. For such cases there is greater flexibility in the types of tests performed in addition to RT-PCR, including serology tests administered within 90 days from the date of boarding. However, due to the economic dependence on tourism, the government

[fazer-surpresa-de-aniversario-ao-filho-e-morre-de-covid-19-no-recife.ghhtml](https://g1.globo.com/pe/paranaguaba/blog/viver-noronha/post/2021/02/23/alunos-da-escola-arquipelago-re-tomam-atividades-presenciais-em-fernando-de-noronha.ghhtml).

<sup>13</sup> <https://g1.globo.com/pe/paranaguaba/blog/viver-noronha/post/2021/02/23/alunos-da-escola-arquipelago-re-tomam-atividades-presenciais-em-fernando-de-noronha.ghhtml>.

authorities of Fernando de Noronha made several attempts to reopen access to the island to visitors: first on September 1<sup>st</sup>, then again on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, and a third time on December 18<sup>th</sup>.

Although tourism is the most important economic activity in Fernando de Noronha, the way it is structured has resulted in socioeconomic inequalities between stakeholders and those earning the income. This is clearly seen among locals and foreign entrepreneurs<sup>14</sup>, and represents a common pattern for Brazilian coastal islands whose main economic activity is tourism<sup>15</sup>. Sixty-five percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the archipelago depends on tourism – a much greater extent than any other municipality in Brazil<sup>16</sup>. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact on the tourism sector has been quite significant. For example, the number of visitors dropped from 106,000 in 2019 to 33,836 in 2020.

In terms of state financial subsidies for the vulnerable populations, several months of emergency aid have been provided by the national government. On Fernando de Noronha, 982 citizens have received the aid to a total amount of R\$ 4.073.264,00<sup>17</sup>, partially making up for the lost tourism activity. Socially, there may have been several positive impacts as a result of the pandemic. For example, the decrease in visitations to the beaches and natural attractions has enabled their ecosystems to recover. In addition, there has been a reduction in the amount of waste generated, an increase in the amount of drinking water available to residents and a reduction in the number of non-authorized residents (i.e., Brazilians who have not received permission to move to the island)<sup>18</sup>.

## Post Covid-19 recovery and the Sustainable Development Goals: A distant agenda

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a crucial test associated with the challenges and threats to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Prior management practices have been shown as only partially adequate for a world that seeks to achieve the principles of equality, justice and sustainability. In the Fernando de Noronha archipelago, the poor ability of public management to resolve and control social, urbanistic, environmental and economic problems has become more apparent. The permanent subordination of a non-democratic government, the dependence on energy that is primarily based on fossil fuels, and the high economic dependence on tourism that is controlled by outsiders to the territory, strengthen the hypothesis that the current tourism dependency and governance structure on the archipelago is antithetical to development based on sustainable principles.

The three attempts in the later part of 2020 to reopen the islands to tourism clearly demonstrate the pressure and power that tourism, and those who stand to gain the most from tourism revenues, exerts on the island territory. This pressure comes only partly from demand. In a region where most of the tourism enterprises belong to outside residents, and where the general administrator is also an outsider, most of the strategic decisions that affect the social and economic lives of islanders are based on what is best for external interests, not local needs.

<sup>14</sup> Rocha & Brasileiro, 2013, <https://periodicos.unb.br/index.php/revistacenario/article/download/15204/13515/#page=74>.

<sup>15</sup> Telles & Gandara, 2012, <https://revistas.ufpr.br/turismo/article/viewFile/22832/17717>.

<sup>16</sup> Sakowski, 2015, [http://repositorio.ipea.gov.br/bitstream/11058/3850/1/td\\_2073.pdf](http://repositorio.ipea.gov.br/bitstream/11058/3850/1/td_2073.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.portaldatransparencia.gov.br/beneficios/consulta?tipoBeneficio=6&ordenarPor=municipio&direcao=asc>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://g1.globo.com/pe/pernambuco/blog/viver-noronha/post/2020/03/23/rodizio-de-abastecimento-de-agua-em-fernando-de-noronha-e-reduzido-para-combater-o-coronavirus.ghtml>.

<https://g1.globo.com/pe/pernambuco/blog/viver-noronha/post/2020/04/17/ministerio-publico-de-pe-determina-retirada-imediata-de-moradores-irregulares-em-fernando-de-noronha.ghtml>. See also: <https://g1.globo.com/pe/pernambuco/blog/viver-noronha/post/2020/04/06/com-reducao-de-pessoas-cai-em-50percent-a-producao-de-lixo-de-fernando-de-noronha.ghtml>. And also: <https://g1.globo.com/pe/pernambuco/blog/viver-noronha/post/2020/04/17/ministerio-publico-de-pe-determina-retirada-imediata-de-moradores-irregulares-em-fernando-de-noronha.ghtml>.



Fernando de Noronha started vaccinating against COVID-19 on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021 for elderly people over 75 years old. Immunization is being coordinated by the island's Primary Care team, which carries out the actions at home. As of March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021, all healthcare professionals and those above the age of 75 years had been vaccinated<sup>19</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how the Sustainable Development Goals allow greater attention to be paid to the archipelago's sustainable future. This includes: 1) achieving SDG3 (i.e., good health and well-being) by accelerating immunization and assuring universal health coverage against known and potential epidemic threats, 2) observing that access to drinking water and essential sanitary conditions, as well as the generation of waste, inversely benefits island residents due to the decrease in tourist numbers (SDG 6), 3) reviewing the benefits of the tourism economy, considering the asymmetric dependence of this sector and the real distribution of benefits between local habitants and outsiders entrepreneurs (SDG8 and 10); and 4) by acknowledging the alarming non-democratic governance structure on the island and the threat this creates for the local community in terms of locally-based decision making and quality-of-life (i.e., SDG16 – peace, justice and strong institutions).

There is still a considerable amount of uncertainty regarding the long-term impacts of the pandemic on the archipelago. Although there may have been some early successes in ecological resilience of beaches and touristic points, communitarian behavior, and local sanitary campaigns, greater problems became evident in governance. The prospects for self-determination and endogenous development on the island are even more threatened in the face of a deficit of representative autonomy on democratic decision-making and the distribution of financial profit from the tourism sector. In addition, the institutional efforts of long term in conservation agenda are at risk associated to the

mismanagement at the government federal level simultaneously with the pandemic.

### Useful Sources

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- <http://www.noronha.pe.gov.br/>
- <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1000>
- <https://covid.saude.gov.br/>
- <https://www.conass.org.br/painelconass/covid19/>
- <https://brasil.io/covid19/>

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<sup>19</sup> Pernambuco, 2021.

### Published COVID-19 Island Insights Papers

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|--|--|
| #1. Malta. November 2020               | #11. Aotearoa New Zealand. February 2021   |
| #2. Egadi Islands. November 2020       | #12. Hawai'i. February 2021                |
| #3. Grenada. November 2020             | #13. Barbados. March 2021                  |
| #4. Trinidad and Tobago. November 2020 | #14. Jamaica. March 2021                   |
| #5. Shetland Islands. November 2020    | #15. Newfoundland and Labrador. March 2021 |
| #6. Åland Islands. November 2020       | #16. Prince Edward Island. March 2021      |
| #7. Guam. December 2020                | #17. Iceland. March 2021                   |
| #8. Okinawa Islands. December 2020     | #18. Lesvos. April 2021                    |
| #9. Mauritius. February 2021           | #19. Croatian Islands. April 2021          |
| #10. Seychelles. February 2021         | #20. Saint Helena. May 2021                |



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