

Cook Islands

I INTRODUCTION

Cook Islands, self-governing island group in free association with New Zealand, in the South Pacific Ocean. Hawaii lies 4,500 km (2,800 mi) to the north, and New Zealand is 2,600 km (1,600 mi) to the southwest. The Cook Islands group has its closest cultural affinities with Tahiti, located 1,000 km (600 mi) to the east. A former colony of New Zealand, the Cooks gained self-government in 1965. Avarua, the capital, is located on the island of Rarotonga.

II LAND AND RESOURCES



Nicholas deVore III/Photographers/Aspen/PNI

Aitutaki Atoll, Cook Islands

Like many island groups in the Pacific Islands, the Cook Islands have both high volcanic islands and low-lying coral atolls. Pictured here is Aitutaki, an atoll comprised of small islets that encircle a central lagoon.

The 15 islands of the Cook group have a total land area of 230 sq km (90 sq mi). From north to south, the islands are spread over 1,400 km (900 mi); the east to west extent is about half that distance. The islands' exclusive economic zone—the area in which it has jurisdiction over resources, scientific research, and environmental protection—covers an ocean area of 2,200,000 sq km (850,000 sq mi).

The islands are divided into northern and southern groups. Six thinly populated atolls (ring-shaped coral islands) make up the Northern Group. The Southern Group islands, aside from two small atolls

with no permanent inhabitants, are predominantly volcanic. Rarotonga, with an area of 67 sq km (26 sq mi), is the largest island. Located on Rarotonga, Te Manga is the highest peak at 652 m (2,139 ft).

Vegetation on the Cook Islands varies greatly between the high volcanic islands and the low atolls. The coconut palm flourishes nearly everywhere. The rich soils and freshwater sources of the volcanic islands also support a variety of tree species, including casuarina, hibiscus, frangipani, poinciana, and bougainvillea. In contrast, poor soils restrict vegetation on the atolls, where the sole source of fresh water is rainfall collected in catchment systems.

Wildlife on the Cook Islands is limited to lizards and birds. A few livestock species, such as pigs and chickens, are raised for food. Marine life is abundant in the surrounding waters.

The climate is tropical, with high humidity and a mean annual temperature of 24° C (75° F) on Rarotonga. The Cook Islands lie within the cyclone belt, and occasional storms can be destructive.

III PEOPLE



Robert Holmes/Tony Stone Images

Rarotonga

The largest of the Cook Islands, Rarotonga contains more than half of the island group's population. This picture shows the southeast coast of Rarotonga, along with several small islands lying near Rarotonga's protective outer reef.

The population of the Cook Islands was 20,611 in 2001, with a population density of 87 persons per sq

km (225 per sq mi). Almost 90 percent of the people live in the southern islands. The island of Rarotonga has well over half of the population. Due to limited employment opportunities on the islands, Cook Islanders living overseas outnumber those at home. The vast majority live in New Zealand, and there is considerable movement of people between the Cook Islands and New Zealand.

The people of the Cook Islands are of Polynesian descent (see Polynesians). Due to extensive intermarriage with Europeans over many years, most of the people today are of mixed ancestry. The official language is English, although most people are bilingual and literate in both English and the indigenous language of Cook Islands Maori.

About 70 percent of the people belong to the Cook Islands Christian Church, which is derived from the Congregationalist London Missionary Society. The remaining 30 percent are about evenly divided between Catholicism and several other faiths. Most Cook Islanders are devout churchgoers.

Cook Islanders are among the best educated of all Pacific Islanders. Education is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 15. The University of the South Pacific has an extension center in Rarotonga, and numerous students attend schools and universities overseas.

Most inhabitants of the smaller islands live in extended families and derive much of their livelihood from subsistence activities. In contrast, life on Rarotonga is heavily influenced by Western culture. Housing and dress are largely Western, and there is a variety of stores, shops, restaurants, and other small businesses.

IV ECONOMY

The gross domestic product (GDP) of the Cook Islands was estimated at \$79 million, or about \$4,000 per person, in 1994. The main economic activities are agriculture, tourism, and financial services. Commercial agricultural activity takes place on the southern islands, where papayas, coconuts, and other citrus and tropical fruits are grown for export. The main subsistence crops are cassava, sweet potatoes, and vegetables. A cultured-pearl industry, developed in the 1980s, continues to grow. Fishing is mainly for local consumption, but the Cook Islands also derive income from the sale of fishing licenses to foreign fleets.

Service industries are the most dynamic sector of the economy. Tourism, offshore banking, and other financial services are developing rapidly. Tourism is the leading growth industry and is the largest source of foreign exchange. Remittances from relatives working abroad are a major source of income. The Cook Islands remain heavily dependent on foreign aid, with New Zealand the largest donor.

Of the islands' 6,600-person labor force, 52 percent work in services (half of which are government positions), 29 percent in agriculture, and 15 percent in industry. The remainder mixes part-time employment with subsistence agriculture.

The international airport on Rarotonga supports flights to and from New Zealand, Australia, Tahiti, Chile, and Hawaii. Small carriers provide service within the territory. There is frequent shipping service from Auckland, and small vessels shuttle among the islands. Rarotonga and some of the other

southern islands have good roads. The islands have a large number of motor vehicles, and motor scooters are popular.

The government operates radio and television stations in the Cook Islands. There is one private radio station. The daily newspaper is the *Cook Islands News*, and newspapers and magazines from New Zealand and Australia are widely distributed.

The Cook Islands are heavily dependent on imports, primarily food, manufactured goods, machinery, and fuels. Imports are typically many times the value of exports. Exports include *copra* (dried coconut meat), citrus fruits, pineapples, tomatoes, and bananas. New Zealand is the primary trading partner; other sources of imports include Australia, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The currency of the Cook Islands is the *New Zealand dollar* (\$1.89 New Zealand dollars equal U.S.\$1; 1999 annual average).

V GOVERNMENT

Under a constitution adopted in 1965, the Cook Islands became a self-governing state in free association with New Zealand. Under this arrangement, the islands manage their own internal affairs and most of their external affairs, while New Zealand is responsible for defense. Cook Islanders are citizens of New Zealand. Although there is no official Cook Islands citizenship, the inhabitants of the Cook Islands consider themselves to be citizens of both the Cook Islands and New Zealand.

The Cook Islands is a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, a voluntary association of sovereign nations and dependencies that give symbolic or actual allegiance to the British Crown. The British monarch, as head of state, appoints a representative (nominally the queen's representative) to the Cook Islands government. The New Zealand government also appoints a diplomatic representative. A cabinet headed by a prime minister carries out the day-to-day functions of government. The prime minister is selected by the queen's representative from the majority party in the legislature. The 25-member legislature is elected every five years. The House of Ariki, a body of as many as 15 hereditary chiefs, advises the legislature on matters relating to tradition and custom.

The High Court has jurisdiction over all civil, criminal, and land matters. The chief justice is appointed by the queen's representative on the advice of the prime minister. Other judges vary in number and are similarly appointed.

The Cook Islands have a lively political scene. Political parties include the Cook Islands Party, the Democratic Party, and the Alliance Party. These parties are often overshadowed by powerful personalities.

For a small state, the Cook Islands is active in regional affairs. Its prime ministers have provided strong leadership throughout the Pacific Islands. The Cook Islands was a founding member of the South Pacific Forum, a regional organization that addresses the foreign affairs and international trade of its members. It is also a member of the South Pacific Commission, a group that promotes regional cooperation on economic and social issues.

VI HISTORY

Polynesian peoples had migrated to some of the Cook Islands, which were settled by AD 600. The language and culture of the islands are closely related to those of Tahiti and the Society Islands to the east. Spanish voyagers of the late 16th century were the first Europeans to reach the Cook Islands. British and other European explorers mapped the islands in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The islands were named after British explorer and navigator Captain James Cook, who first sighted them in 1773.

Missionaries from the London Missionary Society arrived in the early 1820s. Christianity spread rapidly, and the church gained firm control over the social and political life of the islands. In 1888 Britain declared Rarotonga a protectorate, and the southern islands were included soon thereafter. In 1901 authority over the Cook Islands was transferred to New Zealand, and the colony's boundaries were extended to encompass the northern islands.

Largely as a result of international anticolonial sentiment in the early 1960s, the Cook Islands became one of the first Pacific Island groups to achieve self-determination. In 1965 the Cook Islands became a self-governing state in free association with New Zealand.

Contributed By:

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21°14'12.25" S 159°46'39.61" W

elev 1230 ft

May 11, 2004

Eye alt 16.96 mi

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Cook Islands

Average temperature, rainfall and snowfall information is available for the following climate stations in Cook Islands

- [AVARUA](#)
- [AITUTAKI AWS](#)

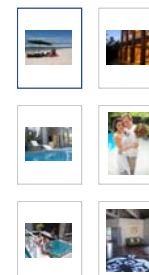
Official name:	Cook Islands
Capital:	Avarua
Area:	total: 240 sq km water: 0 sq km land: 240 sq km
Climate:	tropical; moderated by trade winds
Location:	Oceania, group of islands in the South Pacific Ocean, about one-half of the way from Hawaii to New Zealand
Geographic coordinates:	21 14 S, 159 46 W
Comparative Area:	1.3 times the size of Washington, DC
Land boundaries:	0 km
Coastline:	120 km
Terrain:	low coral atolls in north; volcanic, hilly islands in south
Elevation extremes:	lowest point: Pacific Ocean 0 m highest point: Te Manga 652 m

Map of Cook Islands

Rarotonga COOK ISLANDS

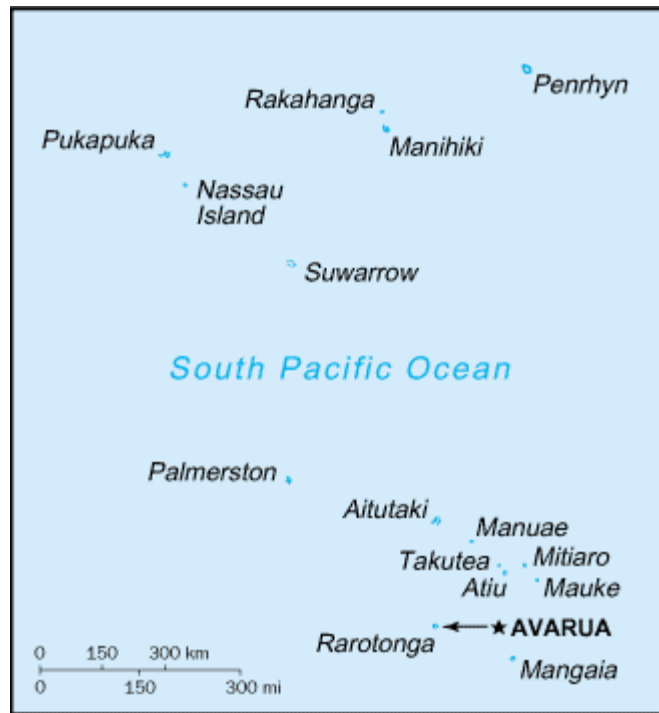


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General info

Entity:
Cook Islands
Capital:
Avarua
Population (2008-07-01):
12,271 (CIA)
Area:
237 sq.km.
Country code:
CK
Region:
Polynesia

Cook Islands

Administrative units

	area	capital	area (sq.km.)	population 2001-12-01 census	population 2006-12-01 census
Rarotonga			67.1	12,188	14,153
Southern Group			145.2	4,013	4,032
Aitutaki			18.3	1,946	2,194
Atiu			26.9	623	572
Mangaia			51.8	744	654
Manuae			6.2	0	0
Mauke			18.4	470	393
Mitiaro			22.3	230	219
Takutea			1.3	0	0
Norther Group			24.4	1,826	1,384
Manihiki			5.4	515	351
Nassau			1.3	72	71
Palmerston			2.1	48	63
Penrhyn			9.8	357	251
Pukapuka			1.3	664	507
Rakahanga			4.1	169	141
Suwarrow			0.4	1	0
total			236.7	18,027	19,569

source: [Cook Islands Statistics Office](#).
note: 2006 census data is provisional.