

**No City Is an Island (Unless They Are): How the Small
Island City of Sanibel, Florida Has Used Independent
Thought and Deviation from the Norm to Better Their
Community during the Course of the COVID-19
Pandemic**

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It doesn't really require too much of an explanation for those who saw it with their own eyes, but the United States of America (as well as the entire world) have been going through what's been the toughest fourteen months financially and morale-wise since the Great Depression, and maybe even before that. At one point during the pandemic over 20 million jobs had been lost,¹ with a fair amount of these job losses being permanent. Even though the economy is recovering much better than was expected back in April and May 2020 partially due to the American Rescue Plan instituted by the Biden presidential administration,² it's still expected that the American economy and job market is multiple years away from full recovery to pre-pandemic levels.³

Although the pandemic had a drastically negative impact on the economy, there were also other aspects of the pandemic that were deeply and sadly personal to many Americans and people around the world; and heart wrenching and sickening to observe for those who weren't as directly affected as much as some. These include the over half a million deaths of Americans from COVID-19, and the multiple instances of racial injustice that have been seen during this time period. Families have been torn apart by these losses due to a disease that's spread more rapidly and dangerously around the world than any other in the last century. Regarding the racial injustice, multiple instances of police brutality have unfairly ended or severely affected the lives of innocent black people who deserved, at absolute worst, a fair trial before any sort of decision

¹ Soucheray, Stephanie. "US Job Losses Due to COVID-19 Highest since Great Depression." CIDRAP. University of Minnesota, May 8, 2020.
<https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2020/05/us-job-losses-due-covid-19-highest-great-depression>.

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<https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/fact-sheet-the-american-rescue-plan-will-deliver-immediate-economic-relief-to-families#:~:text=The%20American%20Rescue%20Plan%20provides,This%20includes%3A&text=%2420%20billion%20for%20tribal%20governments,%244.5%20billion%20for%20territories>

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<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-economy/u-s-labor-market-roars-back-full-recovery-still-years-away-idUSKBN2AX0CY>

was made regarding whether or not they broke the law, and yet they weren't given that opportunity. This has brought even more attention to the inequalities still seen in American society today and minor positive changes are beginning to show, but more than anything it's just been an exhausting and heartbreaking reminder of how far away we still are from true equality and opportunity for everyone.⁴ Although these three struggles have affected places and people around the United States in different ways, every American in 2021 can say that these difficult and sad realities have been main focuses of their lives for the past fourteen months.

A main reason I mentioned how places around the United States have been affected in dramatically different ways by COVID-19 as well as racial injustice is because the state of Florida has handled both of these pressing issues in extremely controversial ways. Although the CDC still recommends state-wide mask mandates to this day to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Florida's governor, Ron DeSantis, removed their mandate over nine months ago. Everywhere is allowed to be open at full capacity, and even though COVID-19 is still being transmitted in the state, DeSantis' rules act as though the virus no longer exists.⁵ As this strategy was being met with criticism for putting people's lives at risk, DeSantis has been accused of not reporting a significant number of COVID-19 cases in Florida on purpose to make it seem as though his strategy for "combating" COVID-19 has been reasonable.⁶

⁴Levenson, Eric. "Derek Chauvin Found Guilty of All Three Charges for Killing George Floyd." CNN. Cable News Network, April 21, 2021.
<https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/20/us/derek-chauvin-trial-george-floyd-deliberations/index.html>.

⁵ Call, James. "Florida Gov. DeSantis Invalidates COVID-19 Restrictions Statewide, Says There's No Need 'to Be Policing People at This Point'." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, May 3, 2021.
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/05/03/florida-covid-restrictions-gov-ron-desantis-lifts-rules-statewide/4923900001/>.

⁶ Miller, Naseem S. "Florida Dems Slam DeSantis over Not Releasing COVID Reports, Lag in Reporting Deaths." orlandosentinel.com. Orlando Sentinel, December 18, 2020.
<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/coronavirus/os-ne-coronavirus-democrats-demand-desantis-transparency-20201218-thz3jzk655h63a5nhjzgaqwekq-story.html>.

In the area of racial injustice, although Florida has a controversial past in this area due to slavery and Jim Crow laws, there wasn't a strong reason for them to try and put themselves in the spotlight with this issue over the past year, as no major controversies with this actually took place in Florida since the pandemic began. However, Governor DeSantis decided to insert himself and his state into this issue anyway. After George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis this past June, many protests took place around the country. Most were peaceful, however some, specifically in Minneapolis, involved looting stores and lighting things on fire as a result of the pain and frustration people were feeling.⁷ Although looting wasn't an ideal form of protest, luckily it stopped quickly and protests around the country have largely remained peaceful since then. However, DeSantis decided that it was a good idea to sign an anti-riot bill into law that said it was okay to hit protesters with your car in Florida, even if they're just peacefully protesting by holding a sign!⁸ Many people around the country have been up in arms about this. Even if it's a bit of generalization, lots of people now just associate everywhere in Florida with having exclusively inconsiderate people with crazy beliefs. Obviously however, this isn't the case, but where you see the outliers might not be where you'd first assume they'd be. This is where the city of Sanibel comes into consideration. Although it's small and surrounded by cities with DeSantis-supporting mayors, recently they haven't been afraid to go against the grain and choose their own ways to go about things, and thus, their city has been better off in this challenging time.

⁷ Miller, Ryan W., Jordan Culver, Tyler J. Davis, Grace Hauck, and Joel Shannon. "Federal Authorities Pledge 'Robust' Investigation into George Floyd's Death; Minnesota National Guard Activated: What We Know." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, May 28, 2020. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/05/28/george-floyd-updates-minneapolis-police-protest-s-fires-looting/5272579002/>.

⁸ Lemongello, Steven, and Gray Rohrer. "DeSantis Signs 'Anti-Riot' Bill into Law, Sparking Outcry from Democrats, Civil Rights Groups." orlandosentinel.com. Orlando Sentinel, April 21, 2021. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/politics/os-ne-desantis-signs-anti-riot-bill-20210419-ilt27x5mzcbheeqvyhclhz2xq-story.html>.

The city of Sanibel, Florida is an island off the coast of Fort Myers in Lee County. It's connected to the mainland by a causeway and it sits in the Gulf of Mexico. It's a popular spring break destination, yet only 7,500 people live there year-round.⁹ Although the residents there tend to have a high quality of life, the people aren't the main focus: the animals are. No street lights or fast food restaurants exist on the island as a means of allowing them to roam more freely at night, and drivers are just encouraged to be very careful. Furthermore though, on what's only a 33 square mile island, over 38% of it is made up of a wildlife refuge.¹⁰ There are more animal hospitals and veterinarians than doctor's offices for people on the island. Conservation and animal safety are a way of life in the city of Sanibel. Although Sanibel is a very nice place for almost all animals to live, only a select amount of people are able to afford to live on Sanibel. With an average household income of over \$100,000,¹¹ almost everyone who lives on the island is very financially fortunate, and there isn't much economic diversity. Given the disadvantages many minorities face economically as well, the city is also unsurprisingly almost entirely white, with over 97% of the population identifying as such.¹² This is why in the past, and even now, it's somewhat shocking to think that the residents of the city would generally hold progressive ideals.

To explain Sanibel's history briefly, the island was originally inhabited by the Calusa Indians until the 1700s when they were taken out by European diseases via Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon and his crew. The island's next famous inhabitants came later in the 18th

⁹ US Census Bureau. "Sanibel, Florida." United States Census Bureau , 2019.

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/sanibelcityflorida/PST045219#PST045219>.

¹⁰ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Debbie Young. "J.N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge." Official Web page of the U S Fish and Wildlife Service, 2008.

<https://www.fws.gov/dingdarling/about/about.html#:~:text=The%20entire%20complex%20is%20approximately,Ding%22%20Darling%20NWR%20fact%20sheet>.

¹¹ "Sanibel, FL." Data USA, 2019. <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/sanibel-fl>.

¹² "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Sanibel City, Florida," July 2019. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/sanibelcityflorida/PST045219>.

century and early 19th century as pirates, the most famous one being Jose Gaspar, who chose to end his own life on the island after being surrounded for capture by the American navy. The island began to be actually settled with residences and small businesses built in the late 1800s, mainly to serve as a vacation town. Permanent residents began to show up more in the 1950s and 1960s, and the island began to look more like what it is today. It was also around this time that conservation efforts started to pop up.¹³

Given that the island wasn't fully settled yet in the mid-20th century, animals were even more plentiful than they are now, and many residents wanted to make sure that they didn't die out because of too much development. One such resident was J.N. "Ding" Darling, the founder of the National Wildlife Federation (NWF). He was very passionate about making sure that the animals weren't going to have to relocate, so he used his influence to get President Harry S Truman to designate a massive part of Sanibel as the refuge that still is there today. After Darling's passing in 1962, the refuge was named after him, the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge.¹⁴ It's still an extremely popular place for tourists of the island to visit, and it works with other wildlife conservation sites as well. Also on the island is CROW (The Clinic for Rehabilitation of Wildlife), which is the largest independent animal hospital in Florida and has been operating for over 50 years.¹⁵

The government in Sanibel hasn't had to do much related to national political issues in the past, mostly just focusing on island-centric things that help the city's economy as well as natural habitat. However, as the pandemic hit and civil rights issues came to fruition much more

¹³ "Sanibel Island History - Captiva Island History." Sanibel Island Chamber of Commerce, January 17, 2020. <https://sanibel-captiva.org/sanibel-island-history-captiva-island-history/>.

¹⁴ "About the Refuge - J.N. Ding Darling - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service." U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Accessed April 23, 2021. https://www.fws.gov/refuge/JN_Ding_Darling/about.html.

¹⁵ <http://www.crowclinic.org/articles/about-crow>

than they had in recent years, Sanibel's government as well as their citizens had to become more politically active than they had been in the past decade.

The city council of Sanibel is made up of 5 members, all residents of the city. Their elections have no party affiliation specified, although some choose to disclose it anyway, just outside of the ballot or official government description once elected.¹⁶ Although this is the case, 3 of the 5 council members worked in science and medicine, and the other two worked in a legal setting and an education setting, so caring about these issues may be why they were more involved than they have been before with both the pandemic and racial justice issues we've seen.

What Sanibel did to handle the pandemic was very different from the rest of Florida, and it's paid off with a lower amount of spread in the area. In the beginning of the pandemic, Sanibel closed the causeway to the island to prevent anyone new from coming onto the island for about a month, and that helped to slow down the development of any COVID-19 cases popping up on the island.¹⁷ However, where they've really deviated from the Floridian norm is the indoor mask mandate they still have today.¹⁸ Although the mandate is backed by science and recommended by the CDC, it actively goes against what Governor DeSantis has said Floridian cities should do, and takes a very independent and different stance from what Sanibel usually does with statewide government recommendations. For a city the size of Sanibel, it's a big deal that they were willing to go their own way, and shows they're willing to do it again in the future.

Regarding racial conflict, there haven't been any publicized altercations between Sanibel residents or visitors and the police department, and the only controversial racist action that's

¹⁶ The City of Sanibel, Florida. "About City Council." City of Sanibel, 2021. <https://www.mysanibel.com/City-Council/About-City-Council>.

¹⁷ The City of Sanibel, Florida. "Lee County Closes Causeway Island Parks." City of Sanibel, March 2020. <http://www.mysanibel.com/Departments/City-Manager-s-Office/News/Lee-County-Closes-Causeway-Island-Parks>.

¹⁸ The City of Sanibel, Florida. "Coronavirus." City of Sanibel. Accessed April 1, 2021. <https://www.mysanibel.com/Coronavirus>.

taken place on the island in the last five years is believed to have been done by a mainland Florida resident who came into the city.¹⁹ Although this is the case, more and more awareness has been traveling around the island and the government has been supportive. This is largely because of the social action group spanning both Sanibel and the neighboring city of Captiva, the Progressive Club of the Islands. They've held consistent zoom meetings throughout the pandemic, and they've also put up many signs giving people information about how and where to protest safely.²⁰ The government has helped in a non-partisan manner just by reminding citizens of the island of their right to peacefully protest, and as such, many Sanibel residents have gone to marches and demonstrations in the mainland part of Lee County where there's more press coverage and access to the public eye.

One more way that the city of Sanibel has been uniquely different from the rest of their state and the country during the pandemic is how they've stuck to their conservation efforts throughout this unusual time. Although visitor policies have changed for public safety reasons with COVID-19, wildlife has been tended to just as much as usual without any drop in service. Because of these efforts, many former and annual visitors of Sanibel who couldn't go this past year due to the pandemic have donated to the cause, and the conservation effort in Sanibel is just as strong as ever. This feeling of community and connection throughout the city, even for people who aren't there, is what makes Sanibel a special place and it's why the ideals of the city work well for everyone, even though it's surrounded by a county that largely disagrees with many of their political ideas.

¹⁹ "Posting of Confederate Flag Opens Dialogue on Racism, Change." [captivasanibel.com/](https://www.captivasanibel.com/). May 23, 2018. <https://www.captivasanibel.com/2018/05/23/posting-of-confederate-flag-opens-dialogue-on-racism-change/>.

²⁰ Progressive Club of the Islands. Accessed May 11, 2021. <https://www.pcislands.org/about-us/>.

Overall, one wouldn't expect a small city like Sanibel in the middle of a largely Republican Floridian county to make progressive decisions, and yet they have, and these decisions have worked. Sanibel has avoided COVID-19 outbreaks better than most of their surrounding cities in Lee County, they haven't had any racial conflict about policing and more awareness about the issue is being spread throughout the city, and a feeling of community's there even for those who aren't in the city at any given moment if you've visited just once. This shows to me how even if a state government is taking questionable practices, if a city manages themselves well and isn't afraid to deviate from the set norm, no matter how small they are, it can be very effective and can build a better community.