**Headline:** A Tale of Two Nations: The North Aral Sea Rebounds While the South Aral Sea Dries Up

**Teaser:** Once a thriving inland sea, the Aral has become a cautionary tale of ecological collapse, political neglect, and uneven recovery, as efforts in Kazakhstan are bringing about a slow revival in the north, while Uzbekistan’s extractivist priorities leave the south gasping for life.

By John Divinagracia

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**[Article Body:]**

Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. But what happens when the learned fisherman finds no fish at all?

This has been one of numerous problems plaguing the [fisherfolk around the Aral Sea](https://www.foodmanufacturing.com/supply-chain/news/22886493/the-aral-sea-and-the-livelihoods-of-nearby-residents-on-the-brink), a shallow basin of salt water straddling the boundary between Kazakhstan to the north and Uzbekistan to the south. Once the world’s fourth-largest body of inland water east of the Caspian Sea, the Aral Sea has suffered ongoing calamities wrought by the fall of the Soviet Union and exacerbated by the negligence of modern societies. Both the ecosystems and the locals relying on the Aral Sea have undergone drastic changes due to the scarcity of resources like water.

This pointlessly wasted, pristine land on Earth is the epicenter of an ecological and economic tragedy that continues to affect the surrounding nations and communities. From the fisherfolk and farmers in Uzbekistan’s and Kazakhstan’s rural countryside to the worsening climate of Central Asia, the Aral Sea’s demise is tied to the fates of those dependent on the basin’s bounties. In the end, what use is a man’s knowledge in fishing when there are no more fish to catch?

**The Shrinking of the Aral Sea**

In an era before the industrialization of humanity, the Aral Sea was a vast oasis in the desert landscapes of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Formed toward the end of the [Neogene Period](https://natmus.humboldt.edu/exhibits/life-through-time/visual-timeline/neogene-period) (lasting from about 23 to 2.6 million years ago), the Aral Sea has relied on two rivers—the Syr Darya and Amu Darya—to regulate and maintain its high water level and temperature. Although technically classified as a lake due to its lack of a direct outlet to the ocean, its sheer size of 26,000 square miles imprinted upon its residents a desire to call this large basin of salt water a sea.

Yet this sea-like lake endured a terrible castration at the red hands of the USSR. In the 1960s, the Soviet Union undertook [a major water diversion project](https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/world-of-change/AralSea) on the arid plains of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The Syr Darya and Amu Darya—carrying snowmelt and precipitation from faraway mountains, across the Kyzylkum Desert, and toward the Aral Sea—were diverted from their original course to feed vast hectares of Soviet-owned cotton farms. By 1980, Central Asia’s production quotas reached [9 million metric tons](https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/dry-tears-aral), making it the world’s fourth-largest producer of cotton.

However, the cost of taking fourth place meant that the Aral Sea lost its position as the fourth-largest body of inland water. Once the Aral Sea began drying up, tears flowed from fisheries and communities that depended on the lake. [Fertilizer and pesticides from cotton production, paired with toxic chemicals](https://www.foodmanufacturing.com/supply-chain/news/22886493/the-aral-sea-and-the-livelihoods-of-nearby-residents-on-the-brink) from a derelict Soviet weapons testing facility, polluted the salty water, killing off fish and damaging the nearby soil. Strong winds would blow down upon the exposed lake bed, and literal salt storms would swallow towns with hazardous particles that cause respiratory diseases and cancer. The loss of the moderating influence of such a large body of water also made summers hotter and winters colder.

Fortunately, the [Aral Sea is gradually recovering](https://www.dw.com/en/the-aral-sea-from-lake-to-desert-to-forest/a-70987224). With efforts ranging from planting black saxaul trees to slow the encroaching dunes to building multimillion-dollar dams such as the Kok-Aral dam, the various conservation and preservation programs from the UN and other organizations have revitalized an oasis from the brink of doom. Still, [terraformation](https://greennetwork.asia/public/news/restoring-aral-seas-dried-up-ecosystem/) is a long and arduous process, and the countries and communities still reliant on the Aral Sea’s dwindling resources continue to suffer the loss of their precious sea.

**A Tale of Two Countries**

The good news is that water is gradually returning to the Aral Sea. The bad news is that it remains a desiccated and salted wasteland. To understand the paradox, a tale of two countries must be told. Uzbekistan to the south and Kazakhstan to the north are the two Central Asian nations that rely heavily on the Aral Sea. In this way, the sea is divided into two sections: the North Aral Sea in Kazakhstan and the South Aral Sea in Uzbekistan. Long after the Soviet Union’s sickle reaped cotton while its hammer pulverized the people reliant on the Aral Sea, both nations have struggled to ameliorate their side of the sea with varying degrees of success. Only Kazakhstan has managed to remedy its side of the Aral.

With a [$87 million rescue fund](https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20180719-how-kazakhstan-brought-the-aral-sea-back-to-life) from the World Bank, the nation constructed a 7.5-mile-long dyke across the narrow channel connecting the North Aral Sea to the South Aral Sea. The project aimed to reduce the amount of water spilling out into the southernmost side of the Aral Sea in addition to improving existing channels of the Syr Darya (which snakes northwards from Kazakhstan’s Tian Shan Mountains) to boost the flow of water into the North Aral Sea. In the summer of 2005, the Kok-Aral dam resulted in a 3.3-meter (10.8-foot) increase in water levels after seven months. The fishing industry in the city of Aralsk and others has prospered since then.

Uzbekistan tells a different story. Rather than constructing a dam, the Uzbek government planted [black saxaul trees and other drought-resistant species](https://www.dw.com/en/the-aral-sea-from-lake-to-desert-to-forest/a-70987224) to curb erosion and slow down dust storms. And while they have adapted to thrive in sandy soil environments like coastal dunes and desert regions, these [psammophytes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psammophyte) are not enough to prevent the Aral Sea from drying up, especially when Uzbek politics is draining it dry.

Following the same course as the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan has allocated its agricultural abilities to becoming a major exporter of water-intensive cotton, a main staple of the economy. Millions of people have worked—many for years—in forced labor campaigns from former Soviet or current Uzbek governments, further depleting water resources from the Aral Sea. The discovery of natural gas and oil in the Aral Sea’s dried seabed also encouraged the Uzbek government to pursue more white and black gold rather than restore the lake to its aquamarine glory. As of 2023, Uzbekistan was the [tenth-largest cotton exporter in the world](https://www.worldstopexports.com/cotton-exports-by-country/) (China, the United States, India, and Brazil were the top four).

Due to Uzbekistan’s persistent focus on cotton and oil, there is a lack of attention to reviving the Aral Sea. The fish and fisherfolk who suffer the most from the troubles that have afflicted them since the Soviet Union are in dire straits. Compressing bleeding wounds matters little when the daggers are still stabbing, and the Aral Sea will continue to leak and dry up if steps are not taken to mend the issues that started the sea’s shrinking.

**Teach a Person to Fish**

While the North Aral Sea has recovered, the South Aral Sea has become a desolate and desecrated wasteland, characterized by high salinity and a low chance of recovery. In spite of these grim tidings, some in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and everywhere else have not surrendered the hope that the southern side of the Aral Sea—and the whole sea-like lake in general—will regain its 26,000 square miles of unpolluted and fish-flourishing water. Even now, there are continued efforts to rejuvenate the salinated and polluted soil and restore healthy water to the Aral Sea.

Aside from the continued operations of the Kok-Aral dam, phalanxes of black saxaul trees are still planted all over the Aral Sea and the terrain in need of these hardy shrubs. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been using an innovative project called the [Environmental Restoration of the Aral Sea](https://eos.com/blog/the-aral-seas-rebirth-hope-blooms/) (ERAS) to monitor the impact of the black saxaul on the surrounding ecosystems. Using a combination of EOS Data Analytics’ satellite imagery and cooperation with government bodies, the project has seen a partial yet positive growth in vegetation.

ERAS-I prioritized Kazakhstan’s afforestation in 2021. The following year, ERAS-II shifted to the Uzbek side of the Aral Sea. [The “Oasis” Project](https://indepthnews.net/from-crisis-to-comeback-the-aral-seas-recovery/), as it has been called, is a slow but tremendous step toward the resuscitation of the Aral Sea. Nations like China are actively participating in the [“Green Silk Road” program](https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/581455), while the [International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea](https://earth.org/the-aral-sea-catastrophe-understanding-one-of-the-worst-ecological-calamities-of-the-last-century/)—comprising Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—ensures the collaboration of various interstate, environmental, scientific, and practical entities to educate everyone on the need to preserve the Aral Sea.

Fish have returned. Fishermen, too. And like the emblematic paradigms of Lake Chad in Africa or Lake Urmia in Iran, the Aral Sea is a poignant reminder of man’s misbegotten activities on the environment. [Things may not be as pristine as they used to be on Earth](https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20160208-theres-no-such-thing-as-truly-pristine-nature-anymore), but we can teach the current generation and the next not to pointlessly waste resources or land.