

The story of the Aral Sea

A message from *Life* co-author Helen Stephenson

I remember reading about the Aral Sea a long time ago. I think it was one of the first environmental stories that had an impact on me. Since I first read about it, there have been twists and turns in the story, which these three short news items from the National Geographic news page explain.

April 2010

One Sunday afternoon in Kazakhstan last August, three dozen fishermen met near the shore of the North Aral Sea. They brought food to eat and they had races and throwing contests. Afterwards, they relaxed telling stories and singing songs about the Aral Sea and fishing and how much they loved both of these things. For many years before this, there had been no reason to celebrate. The Aral Sea in Central Asia, once the fourth largest lake in the world, had shrunk because of irrigation and drought. Then in 2005, the Kazakh government and the World Bank constructed a dam that separated the northern and southern parts of the sea, allowing the northern part of the Aral Sea to start to recover. There are fish in the water again and for the past four years, fishermen have come here to celebrate. Philip Micklin is a scientist who has been studying the sea since the 1980s. 'Nature can come back,' he says.

October 2014

Satellite images released this week show that the eastern part of the Aral Sea is completely dry. 'It is likely the first time it has completely dried up in 600 years,' said expert Philip Micklin. The Aral Sea once covered 67,300 square kilometres. It's actually a freshwater lake, not a saltwater sea, since two of Central Asia's biggest rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, flow into it. The Aral Sea used to be a busy place. It provided work for 40,000 people and supplied the Soviet Union with a sixth of its fish. As the lake dried up, it separated into several small lakes which together were only a tenth of the lake's original size. The eastern part nearly dried up in 2009, but it recovered in 2010 after substantial rainfall. Now, it's completely dry.

June 2015

Yusup Kamalov, a scientist from Uzbekistan, is my guide. We're standing looking at a vast desert. Except that it's not like any other desert – there are abandoned fishing boats lying on the sand. Fifty years ago, the southern shore of the Aral Sea was right where we stand. Now it is 80 kilometres away to the northwest and we set off to drive to the water's edge. On the way, we pass oil and natural gas rigs standing on the sand. 'Each year a few more are put up,' says Kamalov. 'Can you imagine,' he says, 'that 40 years ago the water was 30 metres deep right here?' Eventually, we see a silver line sparkling on the horizon. We reach the water and I try to swim – but the water is so salty I just float on the surface. And with 110 grams of salt per litre of water (compared to about 35 grams in the world's oceans), no fish are able to survive here. 'This is what the end of the world looks like,' says Kamalov.

Glossary

dam (n) a wall to stop water flowing or moving

drought (n) a long period with no rain

freshwater (adj) containing water that does not have salt in it, like the water in rivers and lakes

irrigation (n) a system for taking water to crops

rig (n) a structure for getting oil or gas out of the ground

saltwater (adj) containing water that has salt in it, like the water in seas and oceans