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# Aral Sea Sinks Into the Sand

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## Receding Central Asian Sea Reduces to Lakes

This rotting boat stands on a sandy desert that was a part of the Aral Sea. If steps aren't taken, the sea could disappear in 15 years. (David Turnley/PNI)

REUTERS

**M U Y N A K, Uzbekistan, April 8** — Ongarbai, an old Uzbek fisherman, tars his rickety boat in preparation for his next trip. He may bring in a dozen fish or more to sell to friends for a pittance.

A tiny lake is his only remaining source of fish, contained by a dam erected by desperate villagers to stop their lifeline from disappearing altogether. The Aral sea they once sailed has now receded far out of sight.

Its waves lap a shore more than 50 miles to the north and the handful of people remaining in Muynak have given up trying to chase the shrinking waters of what was once the world's fourth largest inland sea.

They are the only survivors of the fishing community of Muynak, Uzbekistan's once bustling port on the sea, now a dusty ghost town in the middle of desert-like sand, salt and scrub.

### Realizing It Won't Come Back

"We never expected it to be like this," said Ongarbai. "When the sea began receding we thought it would return before long. It took us years to realize it was gone for good."



The Aral Sea is half the size it used to be, decimating wildlife and leaving fishermen without work. (ABCNEWS.com/Magellan Geographix)

It has split into two, a southern part and a much smaller northern part in Kazakhstan, and will divide into three if the waters continue to dry up.

Some Uzbek ecologists predict it could vanish altogether by 2015 if radical steps are not taken. Indigenous animals are already largely extinct, killed off by the drop in water levels and rising salt content.

"The damage to aquatic fauna has been massive," said Werner Roeder of the World Bank Uzbek mission, who is closely involved in the bank's major water management program in Central Asia.

### Leads to Economic, Health Problems

Disease and infant mortality are also high in the areas nearby, often due to a lack of drinking water and poor diet, and unemployment is rising on the unproductive

### SUMMARY

The once-large Aral Sea is reduced to a pair of much smaller lakes, and could vanish completely by 2015 if the drying continues.

### More on the Region

- [Uzbekistan Country Profile](#)
- [Kazakhstan Country Profile](#)

"We never expected it to be like this. When the sea began receding we thought it would return before long. It took us years to realize it was gone for good."  
Ongarbai, Uzbek fisherman

land. The sea's misfortune is one of the biggest blights on Soviet history, a man-made catastrophe its architects could have predicted.

Moscow, hungry for more cotton to feed an expanding textile industry, ordered water to be drained from the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers, which feed the Aral Sea from the Pamir and Tian Shen mountains far to the east. Leaking waterways and thirsty desert land drank the once mighty rivers dry until they failed to reach the sea at all in the 1970s and 1980s.

Ubbiniyaz Ashirbekov, director of the International Fund to Save the Aral Sea, said the trend had been temporarily reversed with one trillion cubic feet from both arteries reaching the Aral in 1998, a big jump on 1997. "Last year we had a lot of water, but of course it will not do anything to solve the problem," he said.

Along the road from Nukus, the administrative center of the Karakalpakstan region where Muynak is located, he pointed to fields so white with salt they look like they are covered in snow. The irony of declining cotton yields because of irrigation designed to boost crops was not lost on Ashirbekov.

### Ghost Town by a Phantom Lake

Muynak itself is a sorry sight. Its roads are dusty and dry, buildings rot and decay, families live in squalid shacks and men and women wander aimlessly through the streets. Many have left the ghost town and those who remain seem to be there merely to live out the rest of their days.

"There is nowhere to go and nothing to do," said Aibek, a 35-year-old driver, as his old UAZ jeep bounced across what used to be the Aral seabed. "For the kids this place is a nightmare. Many are resorting to drink."

At the local canning plant, once Muynak's main employer, production is down to 2.5 million tins of seafood a year from 17 million at its peak. The fish no longer come from the Aral but from the Baltic and Caspian seas.

From the top of the hill outside town, endless sand is all that can be seen, with the odd rusting hulk of a boat and a gas well to break the monotony.

Bakht Sharafova, a senior doctor at Muynak's hospital, said the town was battling to contain high rates of anemia, cancer, tuberculosis and hepatitis.

### Too Hard, Too Late for Action?

The five Central Asian presidents were to discuss the Aral Sea at a summit in the Turkmen capital of Ashgabat this week. Unlike in Soviet times, they now readily recognize the disaster their predecessors have burdened them with. But economic pressures and political wranglings are expected to prevent any real action being taken to resolve the problem.

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan rely heavily on cotton for vital hard currency and are unlikely to want to sacrifice at a time when the emerging markets crisis and low commodity prices have brought their economies to the brink of crisis.

Roider of the World Bank said leaders will be unlikely to seek a fundamental change in regional water management. "They know if they start tinkering they do not know where they will come out," he said in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent.

He said the Aral could never return to what it was. The best that could be hoped for was a containment of the problem or a slight rise in the water levels over time. "For the Aral to return they would have to stop all irrigation for 10 years. People would die upstream just to refill the sea. What is the value in that?" ■

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