

## EXPLORING

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## PART THREE: The Shrinking of a Sea

Join us as we visit Asia and explore the human impact on the environment. This five-part series runs Wednesdays through May 12.

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**F**irst, close your eyes. It is difficult to comprehend the tragedy of the Aral Sea without using your imagination. Next, pretend you are a fisherman living in a port city. You wake up every morning, walk to your boat and catch pike, perch and sturgeon in the waters just steps from your home. Now, imagine that you wake up one day and the water is 12 paces away instead of 10. The next day it is 14 paces instead of 12. And 30 years later, you cannot fish at all because the fish have all died and the water is now more than 50 miles away – the distance from Snoqualmie Pass to Puget Sound.

### The Plight of the Fisherman of the Aral Sea

The Aral Sea, located in Central Asia, was once the fourth-largest inland body of water in the world, just behind Africa's Lake Victoria. Today it has lost 90 percent of its volume and shrunk so much that it has divided into several distinct parts. The sea is shared by Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, two former republics of the Soviet Union. The water that fills the sea comes from the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, two large rivers flowing out of the massive



A ship rusting on what was once the Aral Sea. (Photo: Damian Kostiuk)

mountains of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The shrinking of the Aral Sea began in the 1960s when the Soviet leadership decided to make Central Asia its center of cotton and agricultural production. Large canals and reservoirs were built to divert water for irrigation. However, Central Asia is an arid region, and cotton is a thirsty crop. Because more water was used each year than was replaced by the rivers, the water level began to decrease. The sea was like the checking account of a person who spends more money than he makes.

The Aral Sea's disappearance has affected both people and the environment. Pesticides and extra salts from cotton cultivation flowed into the sea, killing many fish species and destroying the basis of the local economy. More than

half the people in the region left to find work elsewhere. When the sea started to recede, less water meant higher evaporation rates, and those extra salts and chemicals were left behind as part of the seabed when the water evaporated. Strong desert winds spread the particles around the region, causing an increase in respiratory cancers in communities near the sea. The lack of freshwater has caused hygiene to worsen and waterborne diseases like diarrhea to increase.

The presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have tried to come up with an agreement on how to save the Aral Sea, but they have been unsuccessful so far. Each country wants to look out for its own interests and is unwilling to make concessions to produce an agreement.

### The Tide May Be Turning

While the southern section of the Aral Sea continues to shrink, the northern part has started to recover. The government of Kazakhstan built an eight-mile dike across the channel where water flows between the smaller northern section and the larger southern section. Engineers hoped that the level of the sea would rise 10 feet in 10 years, but the water level increased that much in just seven months. The salinity has begun to decrease, and native fish species are being reintroduced.

The waters have not returned all the way to the port cities, but the fishermen of the Aral Sea can now count backward the number of paces it takes – today, two miles; next year, one mile; maybe in the future, only a few steps – once again.

### Comprehension questions:

- 1) What caused the Aral Sea to begin to shrink?
- 2) What are the source waters of the Aral Sea and where do they come from?
- 3) How has the Aral Sea's disappearance affected both people and the environment?

### Next week:

### China's Water Blues



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