Aral sea

Last summer, I visited Moynaq, a city that used to be a sea port, but the sea or the remnants of it are now a hundred kilometers away. Like almost everyone from Central Asia, I was aware of the history of the Aral Sea. However, that knowledge lacked a personal or emotional side to it—just a number of facts about yet another man-made catastrophe. We were all aware from geography lessons in secondary school how it happened, why, and the numbers of the sea surface that now turned into desert. Most of the information from the news was about how the sea levels were changing or how many trees were planted to stop salt from spreading into the air. Surprisingly, even on some maps that we see everywhere, some still portray the Aral Sea as it used to look before separating into smaller parts. This visit added very vivid imagery to those dry facts I knew.

When I started gathering my thoughts after the visit, I tried to connect them to the experiences of my family. My parents grew up near a saltwater lake in Kazakhstan. The lake is still a major part of their childhood stories, and so many rituals and traditions are linked to it. They would start the summer at the lake and go to the camp during a long 3-month break. Interestingly, mostly children were actually going to the lake during the summer. Adults were usually busy with work in agriculture or other industries owned by the government. Sometimes those who worked in the fields were taken to the lake to rest. However, there were not many camp sites or public infrastructure around the lake compared to the modern tourist industry. Parents remember two fish factories that were working non-stop. My grandparents would tell stories about the healing properties of the salt water and how warriors would go there after the battles. Although the lake was part of the country's industry, primarily serving utilitarian purposes, it meant that locals had limited opportunities to enjoy it.

Now, when I visit, the salted air and water feel familiar to me too. The lake is still part of the everyday lives of people around it, and the livelihoods of so many families depend on it. The way my parents refer to the place they were born and grew up as if it's constant—something

that is always there, and you can go back from time to time. So, it is shocking and hard to comprehend that something so major like the sea can disappear in such a short time. We are conditioned to think of nature as that brutal force that we harbor and make life out of, and imagining something so vast disappearing is hard to imagine. How does someone experience the fact that part of their identity related to the geographical place is not there anymore? I tried to ask my parents and other people who remember the period when the news about the Aral Sea started spreading. There was not a lot of awareness about the issue; they could recall stories about people moving from the affected regions or just facts that the sea is drying up.

When I shared my thoughts about the visit to Moynaq, I was warned to address them cautiously. One warning came from someone from Central Asia who does research in water management and has experience with how these ecological issues are addressed. Water management requires a joint effort from Central Asian states, which is a complex issue. I can only speculate that each state has different economic plans and priorities. Sometimes, matching them with environmental issues is not always possible. A tragedy like Aral can also be trivialized by the media or portrayed as another shocking adventure for tourists. My perspective on the matter is clearly the opinion of an outsider. There are many initiatives and measures taken that involve different stakeholders, and I surely cannot give any insights on them. So, I would rather write about what kind of questions the trip made me ask myself, and I do not want to perpetuate any stereotypes about the issue or undermine any efforts and measures taken. I also believe that there should be more stories sharing local realities and different perspectives on the Aral Sea.

During the trip, we visited the museum about Aral in Moynaq and a graveyard of ships now resting on sand. Inside the air-conditioned museum, you can watch the archival footage of the sea in a dark room. There is something surreal about watching and hearing the sea on a loop, seeing the walls covered in paintings and photographs of the Aral, and trying to match them with the landscape outside. The Aral Sea is a significant part of the regional ecosystem, and countries are taking joint efforts like river management to restore rivers flowing into the sea. Also, there are local communities whose health, economic, and social situation is severely affected by the sea degradation. There are large areas of exposed seabed that cause toxic dust

storms. Planting saxaul and other drought-resistant plants on the exposed dry seabed reduces the amount of salt spreading into the air. I remember talking to our driver and how routinely he listed all these measures being taken. What is still happening to the Aral Sea was a daily reality for him. Also, maybe he was used to people like our group of researchers asking questions at lunch. We were just another group of tourists, probably asking the same questions, taking similar photographs, and gasping at the same places.

At the hotel where we were staying, I found a tourist leaflet about Karakalpakstan. The Aral Sea was mentioned together with the acknowledgment of the bravery of people facing environmental tragedies. It is a story about resilience and how humans adapt to harsh environments. Are we able to comprehend the extent of our relationship with the environment we live in? Where do we put ourselves in those narratives about resilience and bravery?

There is archival footage of the Aral Sea on the internet, and people in the comments are asking if it's fake. When did we accept the current state of the Aral Sea as a reality? When did we lose the sensitivity to the matter that the sea from the video is not there anymore and accept the horrific scale of the tragedy?

Central Asia is one of the regions where the effects of climate change are more drastic compared to other regions. We have to adapt to a changing environment and react quickly. There are generations of adults who grew up witnessing the Aral tragedy. These individuals have seen their livelihoods, communities, and environments transformed in ways that were unimaginable a few decades ago. Now we notice small reminders of nature, weather, and seasons changing; some of these changes are actually very big. Sadly, the Aral Sea disaster is not a singular event; it serves as a reminder of the broader complex relationships we have with the environment in which we live.

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