

Aral Sea impressions: the tragedy of the commons

I am from Uzbekistan: I was born in Tashkent, but grew up in Bukhara, one of the few oases surrounded by the Kyzylkum Desert. It is located around 800 km away from the Aral Sea, but has been badly impacted by the Aral Sea tragedy: desert winds would bring along the toxic dust and polluted air from the newly emerged desert Aralkum (literally means: Aral sands), spreading numerous diseases among the local population, including cancer. The first time I heard about the Aral Sea ecological disaster was from a school lesson in the 1990s. This problem had already been recognized in the 1980s by the Soviet scientists, and only now, at the age of 40, I witnessed this enormous human-made disaster with my own eyes.

In August 2023 I joined the Zhelezka Project, a group of Central Asian and foreign researchers, activists and artists, intended to explore the railroad route from Astana in Kazakhstan to Nukus in Uzbekistan, and then to Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, stopping at different cities along the way. In this article, I will focus on the portion of our trip in Karakalpakstan, and particularly on our time at the Aral Sea shore which was located in the city of Muynak in the 1960s. This was my second visit to the graveyard of the abandoned boats that remained from this former fisherman's town. Once a vibrant and prosperous industrial city, with the canning plant as a major employer in the region, Muynak began its decline after the rapid shrinking of the Aral Sea, which used to be the second largest inland water body until the 1960s. The massive cotton campaign in Uzbek SSR led to rapid decline in water inflow to the Aral Sea, which was fed by Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers that are now irrigating the desert soils allocated for the cotton fields. In the aftermath of such an industrialized agricultural shift, the Aral Sea has shrunk up to 90% from its original size by the 1990s.

Once we arrived at Muynak, the feeling of a dying town surrounded us. We barely found a diner to have lunch, as not many outsiders visit this place. Although their delicious food was rather cheap by the Western standards (~3€/person), it became a sort of a quest to pay for meals since our group leader had only a European Visa card as a payment method, which is not widely accepted in this remote area. This small detail shows how polarized the worlds are: the one which we came from versus the one which the locals live in through their daily lives. Teenage girls who were serving the tables, looked at us as another bunch of foreign tourists barging in their hometown. They could not understand why these strangers, among whom were some that spoke the local languages, could not pay like everybody else, with cash! Ever since Uzbekistan opened up for tourism by easing the entry-visa procedures in 2018, the country experienced a huge wave of tourists coming in for new adventures. The Aral Sea has become a hotspot for foreign bloggers and then tourists, while Muynak, located at the fore-post of the former sea basin, becomes the ending destination for the majority of visitors. However, since there is still an

unsteady flow of foreigners, the usual tourism infrastructure including the cashless payment systems is not well established here.

Now exposed to the outside world, the Aral Sea ecological catastrophe draws in numerous adventurers with different goals: some of them want to witness it firsthand and some just want to tick a box and take a few photographs and/or videos for their world trip collections. Perhaps there are a few enthusiasts who indeed care about the problem of the Aral Sea, although there wasn't much done from the Uzbekistan side because the environmental issue requires significant funding. This has been well documented in countless reports that different international organizations produce each year.

Personally, I was more interested in the local people's livelihoods and their survival and coping mechanisms in this remote area that is often underfunded by the Uzbekistan government. Majority of locals are Karakalpaks, an ethnically different group from the Uzbeks; closer to the Kazakhs by their language and traditions. Often, they express their feelings of not being treated equally as the Uzbeks. Yet, being neighbors, they grew to co-exist relatively peacefully for many decades. The town of Muynak is in fact home to one of the oldest communities, preserving some traditional houses hidden away from the major roads. When one looks around this place closely, one can see the layers of different periods that this town has survived. These communities do not attract much attention from the tourists. The tourists come mainly to look at the graveyard of old ships, and take selfies in front of the boats, on the boats, around the boats, behind the boats. The social media-obsessed tourists, both foreign and from different parts of Uzbekistan, feel the need to put their personal marks on these old rusty pieces of metals and woods, as if they then become part of this important history. In a way, they add to the destruction of these remnants of the former fishing community. Even without tourists, the old boats are doomed to decay under the scorching sun and ruthless winds of desert.

Apart from bloggers and tourists, The Aral Sea also attracts groups of activists, mainly from Tashkent. They conducted several big events intended to draw attention to the ecological disaster of the Aral Sea, such as STIHIA festival – a gathering of arts and culture professionals dedicating their works to different topics related to this place, or saxaul trees planting activities by the international aid organizations in cooperation with the local government. Businesses and activist groups have similarly organized several trips to plant trees in the desert of the Aral Sea basin. Musical festival STIHIA, organized annually by MocHub since 2020 is turning into a popular event among the foreigners and locals, which combines arts, cultural activities and an ecological agenda that also has benefits for the local Muynak's economy. As a result, several mini-hotels and hostels are established there alongside a few diners that operate mainly during these big events. However, the tree-planting initiatives are often being mocked by the locals due to the fact that those trees were planted without long-term planning: unsustainable pine trees were planted in the dry, toxic sand of the Aral Sea basin and left uncared for. Soon, what

remained were the labels from the organizations that supposedly planted them. Naturally, most of these trees did not survive the harsh environmental conditions of this region.

In my opinion, the Aral Sea is a monument to the human ego that puts modernization, industrialization and mass production/consumption on the top of everyone else's priorities. We should have learned the lesson that nature is warning us of through these many environmental disasters, but unfortunately we as humans seem to keep failing in preserving our only home in this universe – the Earth.

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