



Demise of the Aral Sea, Kazakhstan

The ships' graveyards of the Aral Sea provide some of the most poignant photographs of a massive environmental disaster. Now straddling the border between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the Aral Sea was until the 1960s a major inland lake within the Soviet Union. Its input was provided by two great rivers from the east, while its output was evaporation within its desert setting, and rare flood overflows to the Caspian Sea. Misguided Soviet "planning" then diverted most of its river waters into vast irrigation schemes, largely to maintain huge fields of water-hungry cotton. The inevitable result was that the Aral Sea continued to evaporate after losing nearly all its inflow, and its open waters were replaced by desert. At opposite ends of the sea, and 400 km apart, the towns of Aralsk and Moynaq were changed from thriving ports to bleak desert towns. Their fleets of trawlers and ferries were stranded in shallows and then left in barren desert as the Aral waters literally disappeared from sight; the ships' graveyards, near each dead port, became icons of environmental tragedy. Since this photograph was taken near Aralsk, in 2001, the scene has diminished with many of the ships being cut up and removed for their scrap-metal value; and the trickle of visitors have noticed more greenery in the vistas as hardy plants slowly colonise the dry sea-bed. The Kok-Aral Dam, completed in 2005, has trapped the reduced flow of the northern river, so that a small North Aral Sea is now stabilised and yields a fishery harvest, though its waters have not returned to Aralsk, nor to the ships' graveyard. And the much larger southern part of the Aral has no real prospect of recovery, now that it is reduced to a few salt lakes within empty desert. © *Photograph and text by Tony Waltham Geophotos*

