

## History of the Aral Sea

Nowadays the name of the Aral Sea is related with the environmental disaster. The lake is located on the border between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan. The Aral Sea is one of the most ancient lakes on Earth, with a history of 3.500 years. It was also the fourth largest lake in the world until the late 1950s, before the ecological crisis. It had ports, fish plants and fishing boats floated on the Aral Sea. Up to the 80es of the 20th century it was inhabited by 34 species of fish, 20 of which had marketable value. During its history the Aral Sea has shrunk out several times as evidenced by the numerous remains of flora and fauna found in the dried bed of the Aral Sea. Various expeditions to the study of the Aral Sea were carried out. Scientists suppose that in the middle of the Cenozoic Era (21 million years ago) the Aral Sea was connected to the Caspian Sea, but then the rivers dried up, separating two seas apart.

The sea has dropped by 16 metres and the water has become too salty. There are now three million hectares of land which were once covered by water. The climate has been affected and changed this land into desert. The ecological catastrophe led to the growth of sickness rate, dangerous demographic situation, unemployment and poverty of the people living in this area.

The Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers feed the Aral Sea. They travel through Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

In the 1920s new irrigation technologies were introduced and larger - scale cotton cultivation was begun. Water from the rivers was diverted for agricultural and population needs. Until the 1950s between 50 and 60 cubic kilometers of water reached the Aral Sea each year. Since the 1960s the Aral Sea has lost almost 75 per cent of volume, and has shrunk to 75 per cent of its size. In some dry years in the 1980s no water flowed into the sea at all. The water has become over - salty and lost more most of its natural plant and animal life. The low quality of water has caused many diseases.

Annually thousands of tons of dust sand and salt are taken into the atmosphere from the deserted floor of the Aral Sea and some particles are found as far away as Canada. In 1989 a special Kazakhstan commission composed the most prominent scientists was set up. An International Public Aral Aid Fund was instituted to work out the programme on the restoration of the ecological balance in the Aral Sea basin. In 1996 the local authorities began to strengthen the Kokaral Dam.

National Geographical Community summed up the best situation by saying: "It has never happened within the time frame of a single generation, the disappearance of such a large body of water".