



The Story of the Aral Sea

A message from Life co-author, Helen Stephenson: I remember reading about the Aral Sea a long time ago. I think it was one of the first stories about the environment that affected me. Since I first read about it, the story of the Aral Sea has continued. These three short news items from the National Geographic news page explain.

April 2010

One Sunday afternoon in Kazakhstan last August, a group of fishermen met for a celebration. They were on the shore of the North Aral Sea. They brought food to eat, and they had races and throwing contests. Afterwards, they relaxed, telling stories and singing songs about the Aral Sea and fishing and how much they loved both of these things.

Once, the Aral Sea in Central Asia was the fourth largest lake in the world. However, it has almost disappeared because of irrigation and drought. In 2005, the Kazakh government and the World Bank built a dam that separated the northern and southern parts of the sea. The northern part of the Aral Sea has started to recover. There are fish in the water and for the past four years, fishermen have come to celebrate.

Philip Micklin is a scientist who has been studying the sea since the 1980s. 'Nature can come back,' he says.

October 2014

Satellite images from this week show that the eastern part of the Aral Sea is completely dry. 'It is likely the first time it has completely dried up in 600 years,' said expert Philip Micklin.

The Aral Sea once had an area of 67,300 square kilometres. Two of Central Asia's biggest rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, flowed into the Sea. This means that it was actually a freshwater lake, not a seawater lake. But it was so big it was called a sea. The Aral Sea used to be a busy place. Almost 20 percent of the Soviet Union's fish came from here and 40,000 people used to work near the lake. As the lake dried up, it separated into different parts. The eastern part nearly dried up in 2009 but it recovered in 2010 after some rain. Now, it's completely dry.

June 2015

Yusup Kamalov is a scientist from Uzbekistan. I am standing with him looking at a huge desert. Except that it's not like any other desert – fifty years ago the southern shore of the Aral Sea was right where we stand. Now it is 80 kilometres away to the northwest. We set off to drive to the water. On the way, we pass oil and natural gas rigs standing on the sand. According to Kamalov, each year there are a few more. 'Can you imagine,' he says, 'that 40 years ago the water was 30 metres deep right here.' We finally arrive at the edge of the lake, which is so salty that no fish can live in it.

'This is what the end of the world looks like,' says Kamalov.

Reading comprehension:

01. What period do the three news stories cover?

- a) three months
- b) three years
- c) five years

02. What happened to the Aral Sea over the period of the three news stories?

- a) It got bigger.
- b) It got smaller.
- c) It stayed the same.

03. How many different parts of the Aral Sea do the news stories talk about?

- a) two
- b) three
- c) four

04. According to the first news story, why did the fishermen meet?

- a) to do sports
- b) to go fishing
- c) to have a party



05. According to the first news story, what was one result of building the dam?

- a) The northern and southern parts of the Sea joined up.
- b) There was more water in the southern part of the Sea.
- c) There were more fish in the northern part of the Sea.

06. Which statement is true, according to the second news story?

- a) In 2009 there was no water in the eastern Aral Sea.
- b) In 2010 there was no water in the eastern Aral Sea.
- c) In 2014 there was no water in the eastern Aral Sea.

07. According to the second news story, ...

- a) the Aral Sea is really a lake.
- b) the water in the Aral Sea was salty.
- c) water from the Aral Sea goes into two rivers.

08. According to the second news story, ...

- a) the Aral Sea provided food and jobs.
- b) there were 40,000 fishermen on the Aral Sea.
- c) there's a lot of activity on the Aral Sea nowadays.

09. According to the third news story, which sentence is true?

- a) The area south of the Sea has been a desert for 50 years.
- b) The edge of the water has moved 80 kilometres.
- c) There's a road to the edge of the Aral Sea.

10. According to the third news story...

- a) Kamalov feels positive about the future of the Aral Sea.
- b) the area now produces oil and gas.
- c) Kamalov thinks the lake is about 30 metres deep.