

THE ARAL SEA ENCYCLOPEDIA

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Reviewer: **Sevket AKYILDIZ**¹

This book addresses and organises thoughts on environmental, scientific, cultural and political subjects concerning the damaging legacy of the Soviet socio-economic transformation within Central Asia. The ecological disaster relates to the shrinking of the Aral Sea's water capacity, a reduction in water inflow from local rivers, and the overuse of water for modern agricultural development. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union overused and mismanaged the local water sources for agricultural irrigation (notably, cotton monoculture), resulting in the capacity of the Aral Sea shrinking since 1960 and continuing into the post-Soviet era.

Dust pollution and chronic human diseases are associated with the Aral Sea retreat. The five republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are located in the Aral Sea basin and share water-related interests and challenges. International concern and interest led to former United States vice-president and 2007 Nobel prize-winner Al Gore visiting the region and commenting upon the deep cultural connection of the local people with their natural environment.

The authors of *The Aral Sea Encyclopedia* report that this text is not 'exhaustive' in knowledge on the subject; their key aim is to highlight the dangers and pitfalls of authoritarian 'nature conquerors'. The target audience of this book is

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the general public, school children and area specialists (p. 4). The structure of the text is alphabetical (and includes a detailed chronology of the Aral Sea region, issues and policies from the 16th century CE to 2008). The alphabetical structure has strengths and shortcomings; it allows for immediate access to terms and concepts and defines these adequately. For example, the two rivers that feed the Aral Sea, the 'Amudarya', 'Amu-Darya' (Oxus) and 'Syr Darya' Rivers, are well explained in historical and geographical terms, as is information on one ethnic immediately affected by ecological and medical threats: the 'Karakalpaks' (see also 'Republic of Karakalpakstan'). The 'Republic of Kazakhstan' and 'the Republic of Uzbekistan' and their histories, economies, natural resource exploitation, and agriculture are summarised in over thirteen pages.

Furthermore, less well-known data is included, making the text up-to-date and taking the readers down fascinating avenues of investigation. For example, the last 'Turanian Tiger' was killed either in 1949 (in Karakalpakstan) or in 1968. The future of the 'Greater Amur Darya Shovel-Nosed Sturgeon' and the 'Snakehead' fish is problematic too. Indeed, this text has something for environmentalists, policy analysts, and inquisitive students. The eclectic nature of this book sets it apart from other narrowly focused academic works on Central Asia.

The weakness of this book's alphabetical method of information organisation is the lack of cross-referencing. Therefore, readers need to have some knowledge about the Aral Sea problem or Central Asia to navigate the book. I recommend this work for university libraries as a reference book and document of humankind's folly. The story of the Aral Sea, the local people, wildlife, and ecology is a desperately heart-rending episode in human interventionism and is likely to be a losing battle for the governments of Uzbekistan (and Karakalpakstan) and Kazakhstan. Indeed, camels now tread the former seabed in places where, in the 1960s and 1970s, fisherfolk in boats fished the waters of the (once) fourth largest sea lake in the world.

Sevket Akyildiz's review of I. Zonn et al., *The Aral Sea Encyclopedia*, Berlin: Springer, 2009.