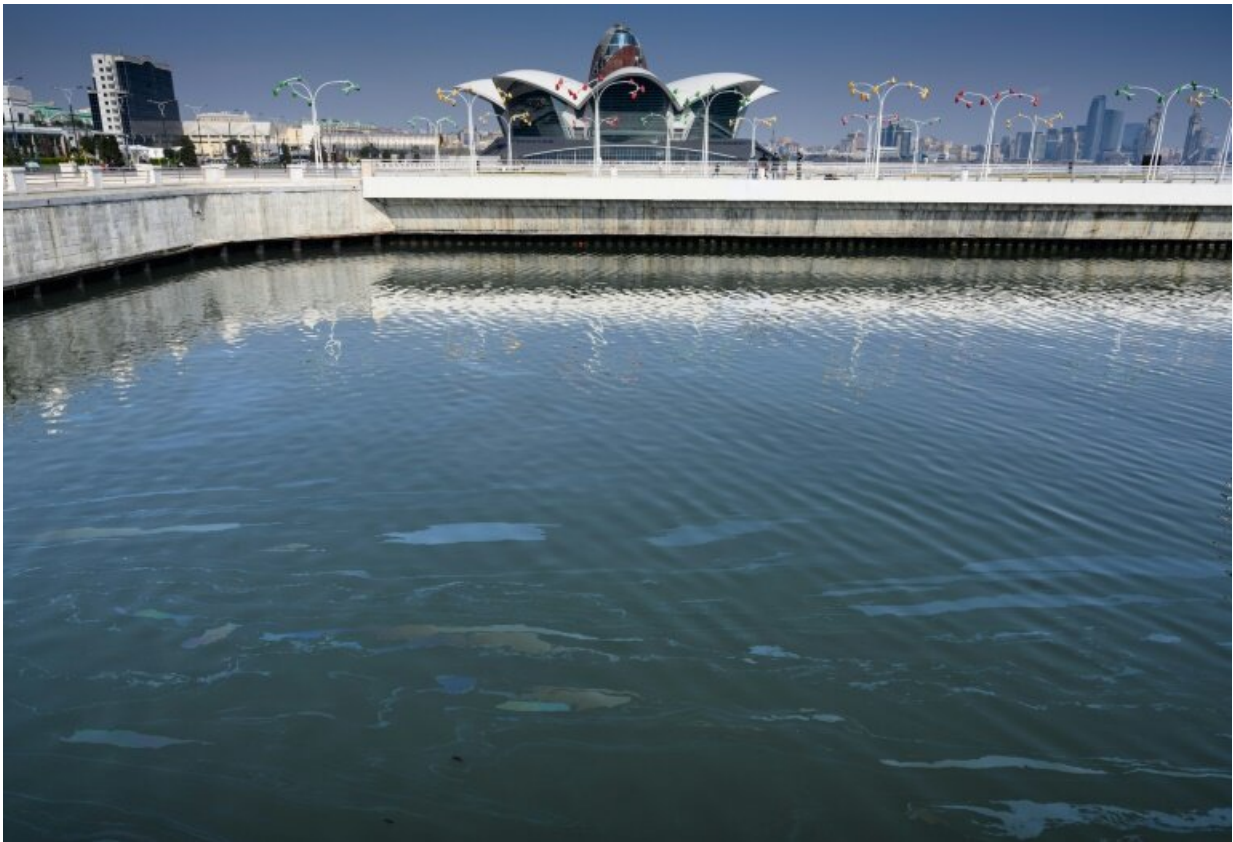


Seals, caviar and oil: Caspian Sea faces pollution threat

April 16 2019, by Andrea Palasciano



Seals that were once a common sight on Baku's waterfront have been declared endangered

Seals waddling along the waterfront were once a common sight in Baku Bay, the Caspian Sea home of Azerbaijan's capital.

Not anymore. Of the more than one million seals which inhabited the shores and islands of the Caspian a century ago fewer than 10 percent remain, and the species has been declared endangered.

Azer Garayev, the head of the Azerbaijan Society for the Protection of Animals, says the seals have for decades been suffering from over-hunting and the effects of industrial pollution.

In 2003, his group found 750 seal carcasses in just one month.

"It was not normal," but no one looked into the issue, the 57-year-old activist said. "The seal is a sign of all the major environmental problems (in the Caspian)."

Bordered by Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan, the Caspian is the world's largest inland body of water, about the size of Japan.

As well as the seals and other endemic species including Caspian turtles and the famed beluga sturgeon, the sea boasts vast energy reserves, estimated at 50 billion barrels of oil and 300,000 billion cubic metres of natural gas.

Pollution from the extraction of that oil and gas, along with declining [water levels](#) due to [climate change](#), pose a threat to many species and put the future of the sea itself at risk.



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Oil and water

The UN Environment Programme has warned that the Caspian "suffers from an enormous burden of pollution from oil extraction and refining, offshore oil fields, radioactive wastes from nuclear power plants and huge volumes of untreated sewage and industrial waste introduced mainly by the Volga River".

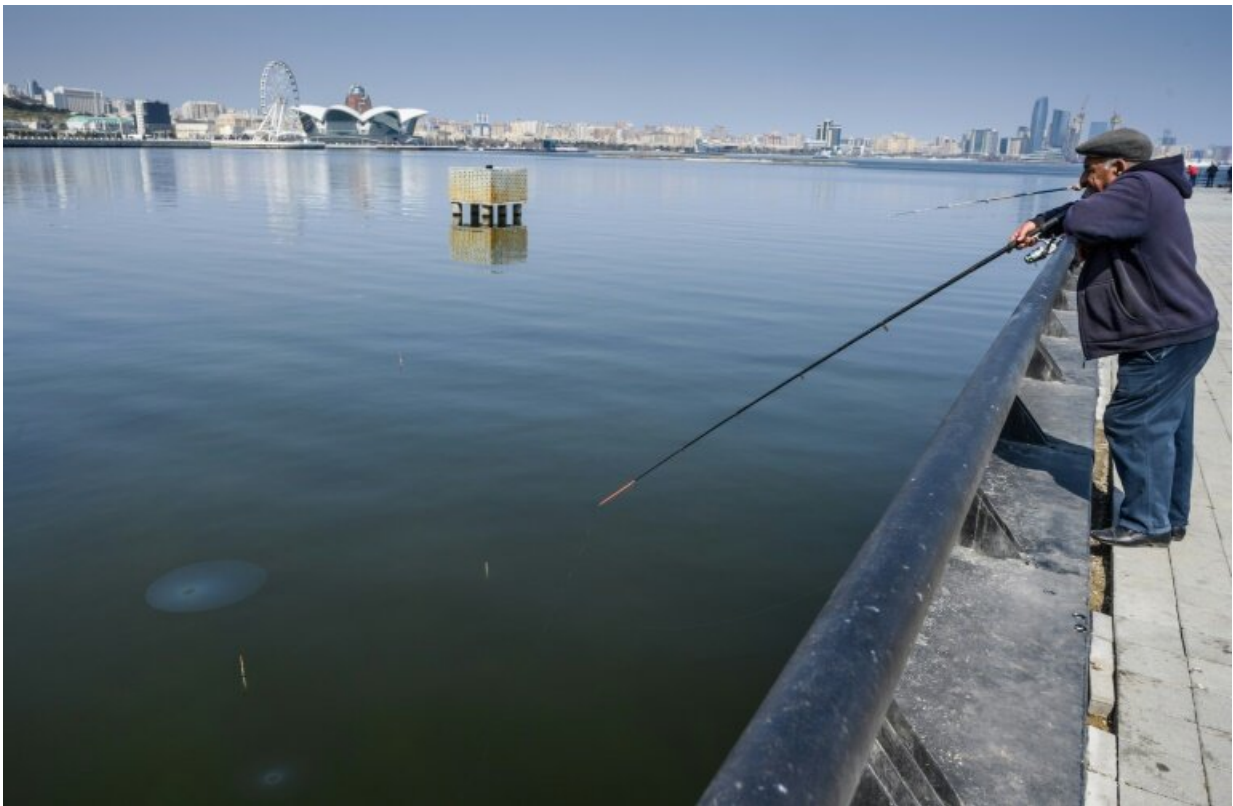
A few kilometres (miles) from downtown Baku, fishermen along the

seashore watch small drops of oil appearing on the surface of the sea and spreading in varicoloured strains.

"Some fish seem to prefer polluted water, so they tend to congregate here," said 26-year-old Rashad.

"The water is dirty," he said, displaying a plastic bag that was caught on his fish hook.

Besides fishermen like Rashad, the entire caviar industry is in danger as a result of the pollution.



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The Caspian Sea used to be home to one of the world's largest population of sturgeons, but it has declined by more than 90 percent over the last three generations, the World Wildlife Fund said in 2016.

"I remember when caviar cost 10 (Azerbaijani) manats (per kilogramme, 2.2 pounds)", or about \$6, said environmentalist Garayev.

"Today, it costs more than 1,500 manats (\$960, 850 euros) and there is almost none left. We have practically no viable population of sturgeon today."

Aligaidar Mammedov, a former hydro-geologist and fisherman turned environmental activist, said that oil exploration methods either kill or chase away the sturgeon. "They set off seismic explosions in the sea," he said, adding: "The seabed is destroyed as a result, and sturgeons are seabed fish."

Mammedov also warned of the potential for oil spills, which would be far more polluting in the inland sea than they are in the ocean.

Azerbaijan's state-run oil company, SOCAR, says it is doing its part and has cleared most of the vast areas near Baku that used to be covered with oil sludge.

Caspian Sea

The world's largest enclosed sea threatened by pollution and global warming



Map of the Caspian Sea

"The environmental challenges came mainly during the Soviet era, when the country didn't take enough care of the environment and the technology was not as sophisticated," SOCAR spokesman Ibrahim Ahmadov said.

The next Aral Sea?

But even if pollution from the oil industry were mitigated, the Caspian

could still be inching toward a catastrophe, since global warming is causing it to lose water.

A recent study by Azerbaijan's Academy of Sciences estimated that the sea level is dropping by more than six centimetres (2.3 inches) per year.

"Climate change along the Caspian Sea basin causes very rapid evaporation," said Elnur Safarov, an Azerbaijani marine scientist and one of the study's authors.

"The five countries bordering the Caspian, their economies, their lives, depend on it completely—fishing, the oil industry, agriculture, communications," he said.



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"When the sea level changes... the social and economic situation of the entire coastline changes."

In 2018, Caspian Sea countries signed an agreement defining the status of the sea, which had lacked an international legal framework since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The agreement mainly regulates military use, oil and gas extraction and caviar production, and activists have so far been disappointed that it has not touched on environmental issues.

They worry that the Caspian may share the fate of Central Asia's Aral Sea, which has all but vanished in one of the world's greatest environmental catastrophes.

"It would be so stupid to lose it (the Caspian) like the Aral Sea," Garayev said. "I don't want to think about it. It would be a crime."

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