

# These men once relied on the Aral Sea. Today, the dry land is a reminder of lost livelihoods

December 6 2023, by EBRAHIM NOROOZI and VICTORIA MILKO

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Ali Shadilov, left, and Anvar Saimbetov pose in front of an old boat in the area where the Aral Sea once was in Muynak, Uzbekistan, Tuesday, June 27, 2023. The Associated Press interviewed Shadilov and others in Muynak, Uzbekistan – all residents in their 60s and 70s who’ve long been tied to the sea, or what remains of it. Credit: AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi

Brushing the dust from his hat and lying on the floor inside his home, Ali Shadilov recalls how he and other fishermen used to laugh at town elders who warned that the enormous sea they relied on was disappearing.

"Everyone laughed and said that it would take several million years," said Shadilov, 73, one of the last surviving former [fishermen](#) of the Aral Sea. "Back then, no one could imagine that the sea would dry up."

The Aral Sea was once the world's fourth-largest inland body of [water](#), with some 68,000 square kilometers (26,300 square miles). Colossal steel ships sailed on deep blue water filled with sturgeon, catfish and other species that were caught, canned and shipped across the Soviet Union.

Thanks to the sea—technically classified as a lake, due to its lack of a direct outlet to the ocean—the region prospered. Hotels hosted tourists seeking cool waters for swimming. Workers and their families migrated to towns along the water, with neighborhoods becoming a mix of ethnic Russians, Kazakhs and local Karakalpaks. Workers at canning factories processed and shipped tins of fish around the clock.

Today, the Aral has shrunk to less than a quarter of its former size. Vast desert surrounds what are now ghost towns, far from the dwindling body of water straddled between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.



A boat sits where the Aral Sea once was in Muynak, Uzbekistan, July 12, 2023. Today, the Aral has shrunk to less than a quarter of its former size. Credit: AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi

The Associated Press interviewed Shadilov and others in Muynak, Uzbekistan—all residents in their 60s and 70s who've long been tied to the sea, or what remains of it. They shared their memories of the mighty Aral and posed for portraits alongside rusted ships that became marooned and now stand in the dry land.

They remember the thriving fish market, boats bobbing on gentle waves, the bounty that provided for their families. The graveyard of ships is a reminder of their lost livelihoods—and the damage brought on not only by nature, they say, but by man.

As a child, Shadilov would sit in his classroom, watching the sea out the



window. Icebergs floated by, melting in the warming spring. He still hums the songs fishermen crooned as they returned to port, children running to the docks to help unload in hopes of getting a ruble in return.



Ali Shadilov, a former fisherman of the Aral Sea, sits on a dilapidated boat in Muynak, Uzbekistan, Tuesday, June 27, 2023. The Associated Press interviewed Shadilov and others in Muynak, Uzbekistan – all residents in their 60s and 70s who've long been tied to the sea, or what remains of it. Credit: AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi

He became a fisherman, just like his father. For them, it was lucrative—some catfish could be over 120 kilograms (265 pounds), Shadilov said.

But the elders began to warn him and others in the 1960s.

"We didn't believe them. We said, 'Come on, there's so much water—where it will disappear to?'" he said. "They replied, 'You've tasted the water, it's becoming saltier. The sea is receding.'"

In the decades prior, the Soviet Union had irrigated dry land in the region by building dams and canals stemming from the Aral to cultivate rice, cereals, cotton and other water-intensive crops. Poorly built channels led to water waste, and the Aral shrank rapidly.

Soon, for Shadilov and others, the changes became undeniable. The Aral turned into separated lakes, and canals were dug for boats to travel between them. By the mid-1960s, boats would scrape against the floor of the bay and eventually maroon.





Anvar Saimbetov poses for a photo in front of an old boat in the area where the Aral Sea once was in Muynak, Uzbekistan, Tuesday, June 27, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi



Coral Bai poses for a photo in front of an old boat in the area where the Aral Sea once was in Muynak, Uzbekistan, Thursday, July 13, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi



Bakhtyar poses for a photo in front of old boats in the area where the Aral Sea once was in Muynak, Uzbekistan, Wednesday, July 12, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi



Adel Bai poses for a photo in front of old boats in the area where the Aral Sea once was in Muynak, Uzbekistan, Thursday, July 13, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi





Gunesh Bai poses for a photo in front of an old boat in the area where the Aral Sea once was in Muynak, Uzbekistan, Wednesday, July 12, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi



Adel Bai poses for a photo in front of an old boat in the area where the Aral Sea once was in Muynak, Uzbekistan, Wednesday, July 12, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi





Ghurban Yaz poses for a photo in front of an old boat in the area where the Aral Sea once was in Muynak, Uzbekistan, Thursday, July 13, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi





Soleyman poses for a photo in front of an old boat in the area where the Aral Sea once was in Muynak, Uzbekistan, Thursday, July 13, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi



Jowad Khan poses for a photo in front of an old boat in the area where the Aral Sea once was in Muynak, Uzbekistan, Thursday, July 13, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi





Kolgay poses for a photo in front of an old boat in the area where the Aral Sea once was in Muynak, Uzbekistan, Thursday, July 13, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Ebrahim Noroozi

As the water disappeared, so did the region's population. Resorts closed. Families returned to their home countries.

Travel by water is a thing of the past. "People now travel by cars," Shadilov said. "The sea disappeared so quickly."

Some of the former fishermen paint their memories of the Aral. Others mark their graves with anchors or lighthouses for headstones when they die.



"The sea saved so many lives," Shadilov said. "But it won't come back."

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Citation: These men once relied on the Aral Sea. Today, the dry land is a reminder of lost livelihoods (2023, December 6) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-men-aral-sea-today-dry.html>

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