

Graveyard of Fishing Boats



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Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

It was early morning in December 2011. On board a 4WD vehicle, my friends and I left Nukus in western Uzbekistan and headed for Moynaq, 210km to the north. Our destination: The Graveyard Of Fishing Boats.

Nukus is the capital of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the huge westernmost region of Uzbekistan which is rarely visited by tourists.

Two things here, however, attracted us – the Savitsky Karakalpakstan Art Museum in Nukus which has the largest art collection in Central Asia, and the Graveyard Of Fishing Boats near Moynaq.

It took us more than 3 hours to reach Moynaq, passing through vast expanses of grassland.

Nukus has a population of 230,000. Apart from the Art Museum, there is little here to attract tourists.

Moynaq is a much smaller place with a population of 12,000 only. However, it used to be a bustling fishing town on the Aral Sea. In fact it was the only seaport in otherwise land-locked Uzbekistan. But all fishing activity have ceased completely and the fish canneries in town have all closed down.

Most of the people have moved away and today, Moynaq is a ghost town populated by cotton field workers and elderly people looking after grandchildren whose parents have left to work in the cotton fields elsewhere.

The shrinking Aral Sea is now more than 150km from Moynaq and the once vibrant fishing fleet now lies rusting on the sand of the former seabed.

From a viewing platform in the north of the town, we saw the rusty steel hulls of 11 fishing boats on the seabed below.

A memorial in the shape of a sail in the centre of the platform bears a map of the Aral Sea, the town's name in Cyrillic and English alphabets, and the year 2011. At the edge of the platform were display boards showing the extent of the lake in 1960, 1970, 1990, 2000 and 2009 respectively, together with a write-up on the shrinking of the sea.

We walked down to the seabed to inspect the old fishing boats, trying to imagine what life was like in this town half a century ago.

The story of the Aral Sea is that of one of the most severe anthropogenic ecological disasters of all time. Straddling the border between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, it was the fourth largest lake on earth before 1960. It was an endorheic lake with two rivers discharging into it but it had no outlet.

In early 1960s, the government of USSR, of which the Central Asian "stans" were constituent Soviet republics at that time, decided to divert water from the two rivers to irrigate the desert in Central Asia for the planting of cotton and other crops. Using a network of canals, it succeeded in turning Uzbekistan into the world's largest exporter of the "white gold" in the late 1980s.

But most of the canals were so poorly constructed that much of the water was wasted through seepage and evaporation. Coupled with the large amount of water demanded by the thirsty cotton plant, this resulted in a drastically diminished discharge of the two rivers into the Aral Sea. Its level dropped and it shrank so rapidly that it is now only about 10% of its former size.

Satellite images show that the sea has become decimated into 3 small lakes. The south-eastern part of the sea has dried up and turned into a large desert. The salinity of the three lakes is so high that fish life has totally disappeared. Desertification of the sea has changed the climate in the surrounding areas for the worse. Now, summers in Moynaq are short and bitterly hot while winters are long and severely cold. Frequent salt and sand storms also badly affect the health of the population.

There is no plan yet to restore the Aral Sea to its pre-1960 state by increasing the flow of the two rivers into it, as an alternative means of livelihood has first to be established to replace cotton planting which is now the region's staple industry. ■



Editor's Note: We welcome contributions from all members on any travel stories.