

WILLIAM WHEELER (2021): *Environment and Post-Soviet Transformation in Kazakhstan's Aral Sea Region: Sea changes*, 286 pp., 59 figures, 2 maps. UCL Press, London. ISBN: 978-1-80008-035-5, £25 pounds (hardcover), 978-1-80008-033-1 (epub, open access), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1kz4ggd>

As a native of Central Asia and a PhD student of ethnographic studies related to the Aral Sea disaster and its impact on the local communities residing in its basin, the book titled “Environment and Post-Soviet Transformation in Kazakhstan's Aral Sea Region” by William Wheeler has been a godsend for me in my literature review and fieldwork preparation on the tourism development on the southern portion of the Aral Sea. In fact, it is one of the most recent, must-read, and up-to-date analyses of this disaster and its effects. The book is rich with the author's personal experience and encounters with the local people as he takes on an ethnographic journey to several towns and fishing villages of the northern Aral Sea in Kazakhstan, provides the historical background of this ecological disaster based on interviews and Soviet archives, and discusses the current socio-economic conditions of the local communities as the sea returns with the construction of the Kokaral dam.

The author organized the book into seven chapters, which can be divided into two major themes. The first four chapters of the book examine the historical background of the Aral Sea and its modern regression. This section explains the historic relationship between the Kazakh people and the Aral Sea. The main subject of these four chapters is the resettlement of the Kazakh population, the loss of livestock, and their integration into the Soviet grid economy and space. It tells the infamous story of Soviet collectivization and of the deaths of millions of Kazakh people that ensued. The author takes the reader into the Soviet past in detail and the contemporary nostalgia for it among local people who see it as more organized and secure in comparison to the unpredictability of current socio-economic conditions. My favorite part of this section deals with the bureaucratic issues within the Soviet system and management. Through the Soviet archives and interviews, the author tells us how censorship exacerbated miscommunication between policymakers and local government officials in the region, marked by what can and cannot be mentioned about the degradation of the Aral Sea in their writings. As a result of these bureaucratic issues and miscommunications, the degradation of the Aral Sea was largely ignored or overlooked, and the topic was

neglected until the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the eventual response by then was already too late and too little to reverse one of the major ecological disasters of modern history.

The last three chapters focus on the modern state of the northern Aral Sea, the return of the northern portion of the Sea due to the construction of the Kokaral dam, and the consequent changes to the socio-economic conditions of the local Kazakh and non-Kazakh population. These chapters tell us about the background literature on the international cooperation to restore the northern section of the sea. Particular emphasis was placed on the role played by the World Bank and the post-Soviet Kazakh government in the construction of the Kokaral dam and the introduction of various species of fish to be cultivated by the Kazakh fishermen. Very interesting and detailed information is given on the role that fishing played in recent history among the Kazakh people. In the period of the Soviet command economy nature was viewed as a force to conquer. Subsequently fish have been seen as a necessary commodity to earn money in a more marketized economy. This reconnected the local population to a new post-Soviet grid as the fish were largely caught by more affordable Chinese nets, to be sold in the European markets. Fishing was also a powerful tool in the contemporary Kazakh communities residing near the Northern Aral Sea since it allowed the local people to reconnect and build strong relationships among themselves as they would exchange and treat each other with fish. This analysis also leads Wheeler to discuss in detail legal perspectives on the restored Northern Sea, not least because of the resulting issues around ownership and fishing rights.

The author has produced an excellent and interesting work that provides the reader with a detailed ethnographic picture of the local Kazakh and non-Kazakh populations of the Northern Aral Sea basin. This analysis is enlivened by large quantities of visual imagery that allow the readers to immerse themselves in the book and see the actual sites and the local populace affected by this environmental disaster: as the old saying goes in my home country of Uzbekistan, „it is better to see it once than hear it a thousand times.“ Some of the images are really unique, such as those of the Soviet history, mosaics, and abandoned locations, creating this sense of traveling in time back into the Soviet past. This is something that I have also witnessed when traveling to the southern dried-up portion of the Aral Sea and the fishing village of Muynak during my introductory journey to the study site of my work in 2021. During these travels, one gets the feeling of different space and time,

almost as if they are in two different spaces simultaneously, one in the Soviet past through the infrastructure and the disaster left behind by the Soviets, and the other being the progressive post-Soviet transformation of the local communities led by modern governments. This particular aspect of this space and time is well captured by the author in his writings and the use of imagery.

In conclusion, through the anthropological journey and research in the Northern Aral Sea, the author provides readers with a first-hand understanding that the impact of the environmental transformation and disaster in the Aral Sea area was not homogenous. Its ultimate effects are dependent upon the availability and management of natural features and resources within the wider political realm. Indeed, the author's work and ethnographic experience with the local populace impacted by environmental disasters provides us with deep and detailed first-hand literature that will surely become a necessary starting point for future research on the topic of the ecological disaster of the Aral Sea and its socio-economic consequences.

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