

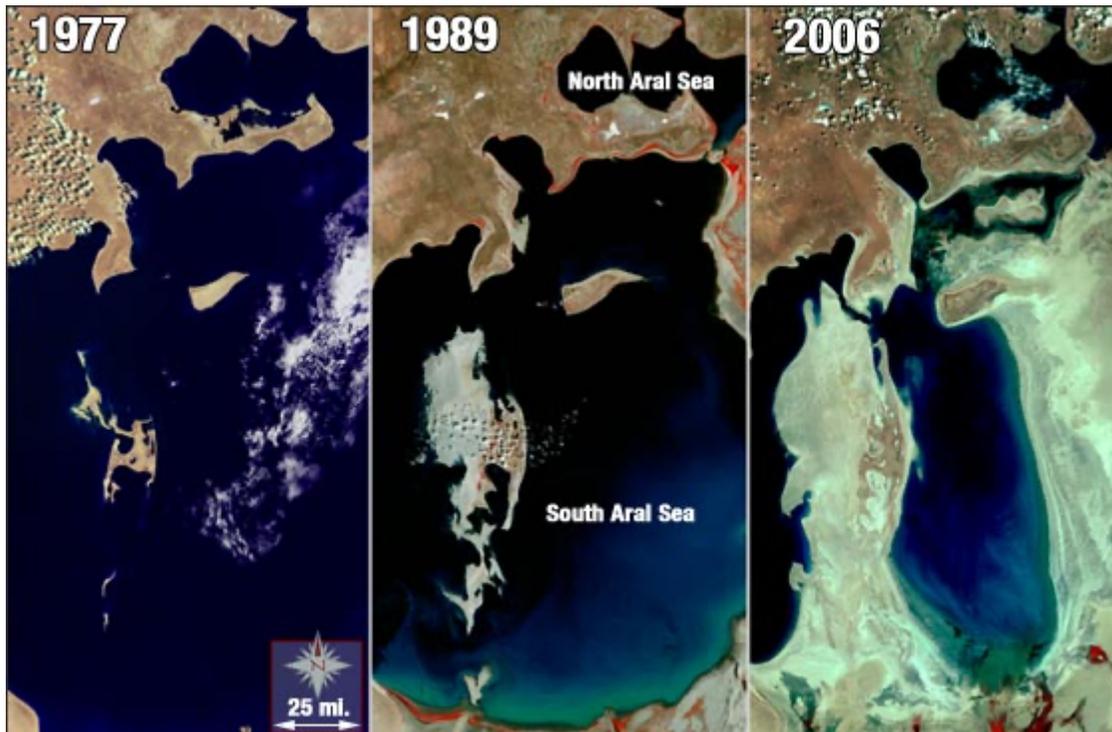
Can the Aral Sea Recover?

The villagers of Tastapuk, Kazakstan, depend on the Aral Sea. Their traditional way of life combines herding camels with fishing. Using large nets, groups of men can collect enough fish to feed their families and also to sell at the market. But the Aral Sea has been disappearing! Each year since the 1960s the size and depth of the large lake have declined.

The Aral Sea is not really a sea at all: It is a large lake in central Asia. It straddles the border between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The sea is fed by two rivers.

In the 1960s, Soviet government planners in Moscow decided that the Soviet Union needed to grow more cotton. The climate of the region is very dry. River water was already used for irrigation of cotton fields. But the planners wanted to almost triple production. Dams were built to send more river water to the new fields. Cotton production went up, but the increase in cotton production had some unintended consequences.

The photos below show how the Aral Sea changed between 1977 and 2006.



The rivers no longer fed the Aral Sea, so it began to dry up. It lost half its surface area and three-quarters of its volume. The water left behind 13,000 square miles of wasteland. There were dust storms, dead fish, rusty and useless fishing boats.

Many people left the region to find a better place to make a living. Some local people decided to try to correct the mistake. They built a small dam to send some river water back into the lake. Other people began to repair leaks in the irrigation system. Eventually the

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government built a larger, more permanent dam and the northern part of the Aral Sea began to expand again.



Scientists from other parts of the world helped clean up pollution, restored fish and wildlife, and provided health care and other kinds of aid to the people of the region. Slowly, the region is beginning to recover. But no one thinks the Aral Sea will ever be as large or healthy as it once was.

Check for Understanding

Use the readings and photos to answer the following questions.

1. What are the **intended consequences** of irrigation systems?
2. What **unintended consequences** resulted from diverting the rivers feeding the Aral Sea for irrigation?
3. What might the white surface in the 2006 photo be? How did it get this way?
4. What is the green/brown substance in the Aral Sea in the 2006 photo? What does this signify?