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NEW CHALLENGES FACING THE ARAL SEA AND THEIR REPRESENTATION IN MEDIA

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Annotation. *This study examines the continued desiccation of the Aral Sea and emerging challenges, particularly the construction of the Koshtepa Canal on the Amu Darya in Afghanistan. The article explores the implications of this development for water availability in Uzbekistan and the broader Central Asian region, as well as its portrayal in media and scientific discourse.*
Keywords: *Aral Sea, Karakalpakstan, Amu Darya, water management, Koshtepa Canal, media representation.*

Аннотация. *В этом исследовании рассматривается продолжающееся высыхание Аральского моря и возникающие проблемы, в частности, строительство канала Коштепа на Амударье в Афганистане. В статье исследуются последствия этого развития для доступности воды в Узбекистане и более широком регионе Центральной Азии, а также его изображение в средствах массовой информации и научном дискурсе.*
Ключевые слова: *Аральское море, Каракалпакстан, Амударья, водное хозяйство, канал Коштепа, репрезентация в СМИ.*

Annotatsiya. *Ushbu tadqiqot Orol dengizining qurishi davom etayotgani va yuzaga kelayotgan muammolar, xususan, Afg'onistonda Amudaryoda Qo'shtepa kanali qurilishini o'rganadi. Maqolada ushbu rivojlanishning O'zbekiston va kengroq Markaziy Osiyo mintaqasida suv bilan ta'minlanishiga ta'siri, shuningdek, uning ommaviy axborot vositalarida va ilmiy munozaralarda tasviri o'rganiladi.*
Kalit so‘zlar: *Orol dengizi, Qoraqalpog‘iston, Amudaryo, suv boshqaruvi, Qo‘shtepa kanali, OAV.*

The Aral Sea, once the world’s fourth-largest inland water body (Micklin, 1988), has been reduced to less than 10% of its original size due to decades of unsustainable water management practices. Beginning in the mid-20th century, the Soviet Union’s aggressive irrigation policies redirected water from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers to support cotton monoculture, severely depleting the sea. The consequences have been catastrophic for the region’s ecosystem, economy, and public health.

Efforts to address the Aral Sea crisis have been inconsistent over the decades. Uzbekistan has undertaken various initiatives aimed at mitigating the impact of this ecological disaster. Key measures include international cooperation through platforms such as the United Nations, as well as regional agreements. Notably, ***the Presidential Decree of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2017-2021)***[1] outlined a comprehensive state program for the development of the Aral Bay region.

[1] Постановление Президента Республики Узбекистан, от 18.01.2017 г. № ПП-2731.

Additionally, ***the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan***[2] adopted measures to transform the Aral Bay region into a hub of ecological innovation and sustainable technology.

Despite these initiatives, significant challenges persist, driven by factors such as climate change, increasing water demand, and regional disputes over water resources. A recent development exacerbating these challenges is Afghanistan's construction of ***the Koshtepa Canal***. This project threatens to drastically reduce water inflows into the Amu Darya River, which is a critical source of water for the downstream Central Asian nations, including Uzbekistan. Such reductions could severely impact agriculture, public health, and ecosystems in the region.

Furthermore, limited media coverage and inconsistent international scientific attention have compounded the difficulty of addressing these issues effectively. This article explores the media's portrayal of these developments and examines the scientific research on the subject, highlighting the urgency of finding collaborative solutions.

The desiccation of the Aral Sea began in the 1960s, driven by Moscow's directive to prioritize cotton cultivation in arid Central Asia (Spoor, 1993). This policy required massive withdrawals of water from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, leaving insufficient inflow to sustain the Aral Sea. By 2021, the Aral Sea's surface area had shrunk from 68,900 km² in the 1960s to a mere 7,352 km² (Micklin, 2010). Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, in his 2023 address, highlighted the severe ecological and economic damage caused by these policies, lamenting their role in the sea's desiccation and the broader environmental crisis.

The issue of saving the island was discussed on international platforms, various funds were created, and various hypotheses were put forward. But he did not go to practical work. On September 12, 2017, Shavkat Mirziyoyev made a speech at the UN headquarters in New York and put forward a proposal to increase attention to 5 issues, particularly the Aral Bay problem[3]. In 2018, a multi-partnership trust fund for human security began operating in the Aral Bay region. On September 23, 2020, the head of state delivered a speech at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly and again touched on global climate changes and the situation in the Aral Bay region[4]. In his speech, the President proposed to adopt a special resolution of the United Nations General Assembly to declare the Aral Bay region as a region of ecological innovation and technology.

[2] Постановление Кабинета Министров Республики Узбекистан, от 25.01.2022 г. № 41.

[3] https://youtu.be/C9Ht0k-3lD8?si=vV1OEnJcpkUW4NIz

[4] https://t.me/uzbekmid/1618

On May 18, 2021, at the plenary session of the 75th session of the UN General Assembly, a special resolution on the declaration of the Aral Sea region as a zone of ecological innovations and technologies was unanimously adopted at the suggestion of Shavkat Mirziyoyev[5]. In this way, the dry bottom of the Aral Sea became a "front": special equipment was brought in from all regions of the republic, and they began to build green covers.

In particular, during the years 2018-2022, green crops consisting of salt and drought-tolerant plants, such as seksewil, cherkez, and qandim, were planted on an area of more than 1.8 million hectares on the dry bottom of the sea. Currently, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya rivers' discharge is more than 115 cubic kilometers of water per year. Only 6 cubic kilometers reach the Aral Sea. Nearly 100% of total discharge of the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya rivers is used for irrigation purposes. Which means that only 5.2% of the two rivers' flow, needed to supply the Aral Sea, actually reaches it. The Koshtepa canal, which is being built by the Afghans in Amudarya, may stop it completely. Even if the Uzbek government comes to an agreement with the Afghans, it is unlikely that they will follow the agreements with the canal that they are building with the possibility of receiving up to 600 cubic kilometers of water[6].

On September 15 in 2023, Shavkat Mirziyoyev expressed his opinion on the construction of the Koshtepa Canal at the next meeting of the Council of the Heads of the Founding States of the International Fund for Saving the Aral. "Its launch can fundamentally change the order and balance of water use in Central Asia," the president said[7]. Mirziyoyev said that it is necessary to form a joint working group to study all aspects related to the construction of the Koshtepa canal and its impact on the use of Amudarya water, involving research institutes in the countries. Uzbekistan has expressed constant concern that this canal will have a negative impact on the agriculture of the Central Asian region and that as a result of the construction of the canal, the amount of water going from the Amudarya to the Aral Sea will decrease sharply. Afghanistan wants to supply water to 3 regions through this canal, but after that it will be clear that water will not reach the Republics of Khorezm and Karakalpakstan of Uzbekistan at all.

Media coverage of the Aral Sea has evolved over time. In the Soviet era, the environmental impact of irrigation policies was heavily censored. In recent decades,

[5] https://kun.uz/uz/news/2023/02/16/ormonga-aylanayotgan-dengiz-orolning-ikkinchi-hayoti-boshlanmoqda

[6] https://youtu.be/idGE3jnelXE?si=kFBmpHwwJ-PoV4Kd

[7] https://president.uz/uz/lists/view/6662

both local and international outlets have highlighted the ecological disaster, focusing on its human and environmental costs. However, coverage of contemporary developments, such as the Koshtepa Canal, remains limited and lacks the depth needed to galvanize international action.

Scientific literature has also documented the crisis extensively. Studies such as "The Effect of Water Shortage on the Aral Sea on the Productivity of Agricultural Crops" by Turdyshev et al. (2023)[8] and "River Water Quality of the Amu Darya in the Territory of Karakalpakstan" by Sadikova et al. (2023)[9] provide critical insights into the socio-economic and ecological repercussions of the Aral Sea's desiccation.

Efforts to mitigate the Aral Sea crisis, including reforestation and international cooperation, have brought modest improvements. Yet, the construction of the Koshtepa Canal presents a new and urgent challenge that threatens to undermine these gains. To ensure the sustainable management of Central Asia's water resources, regional and international stakeholders must prioritize collaborative solutions. The Aral Sea, while no longer a cohesive water body, continues to serve as a stark reminder of the consequences of unsustainable environmental practices.

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