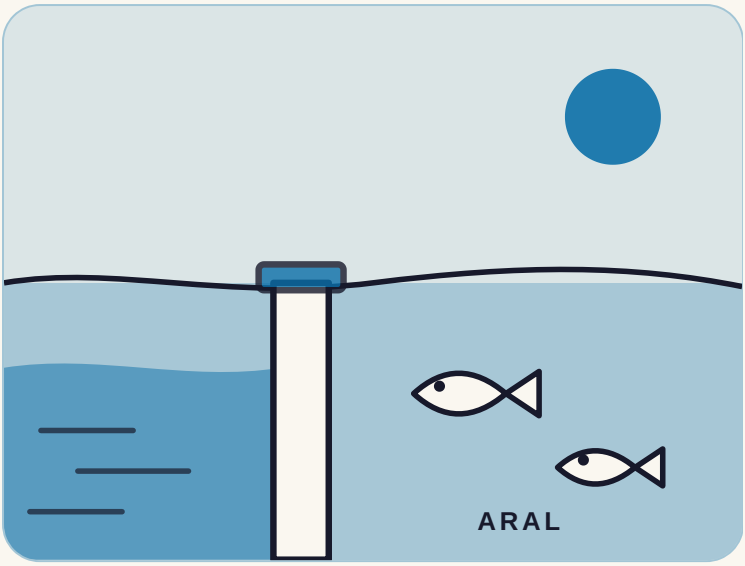

KAZAKHSTAN

The sea that came back

Kazakhstan built a dam to save half of a dying sea. The fish returned, and so did fishing families.

WHERE	Aralsk
WHO	The fishing families of Aralsk, and the engineers who built the Kokaral Dam to save the North Aral Sea
WHEN	1987 to 2025

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

The Aral Sea, in Central Asia, was once the fourth-largest lake in the world. From the 1950s, Soviet planners sent water from its two rivers to cotton fields. The sea shrank and turned salty. The fish died. By 1987, commercial fishing had stopped.

The shore moved far from the port town of Aralsk. Many people left. Those who stayed faced harsh weather and poor health.

> **The people destroyed the sea and then nature took revenge on the people.**
>
> MADI ZHASEKENOV, DIRECTOR OF THE ARALSK REGIONAL MUSEUM, QUOTED BY NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

A wall across the sea

There was not enough water to save the whole sea. Kazakhstan chose to save the northern part, called the North Aral. Twice, in 1992 and 1998, a dam of local sand across a narrow stretch of the sea was washed away.

In 2005, Kazakhstan finished a stronger dam, called Kokaral, about 12 kilometres long. The World Bank paid for most of a project worth nearly $86 million, which also repaired older dikes. In just seven months, the water rose by 11 feet (about 3 metres). Experts had expected it to take three years.

1,360	7,106	34
tons of fish caught in 2006	tons of fish caught in 2016	houses in Tastubek in 2018, up from 9 in the mid-1990s

The fish return

The water became less salty. Salt fell from 30 grams per litre to 8. About 20 kinds of freshwater fish swam back in from the Syr Darya river. Fishing came back to Aralsk.

In the village of Tastubek, fisherman Kidirbai Ibragimov remembers 90 houses when he was a boy. By the mid-1990s, only 9 were left. In 2018, he counted 34. He told National Geographic he would build a new house for his son, who will keep fishing.

A fragile recovery

The recovery is not safe yet. Global Voices reports that the yearly catch fell from 7.8 to 3.9 thousand tons in 2025. National Geographic reported illegal fishing in the breeding season. And the dam that saved the north left the larger southern sea without that water, Wikipedia says.

How it unfolded

- **1987** Commercial fishing in the sea stops.
- **1992** A sand dam across the sea is washed away. It happens again in 1998.
- **2005** The Kokaral Dam is finished.
- **2016** The catch reaches 7,106 tons.
- **2025** The catch falls to 3.9 thousand tons, Global Voices reports.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

It did not save the whole sea. It saved the part that could be saved.

The old Aral Sea will not return. But a living part of it has, and families depend on it.

OUR TAKE

When you cannot save everything, saving one part well can still change many lives.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1

Save the part you can

There was not enough water for the whole sea, so Kazakhstan chose the north.

Try this: When a problem is too big, name the one part you can fix and start there.

2 Learn from a failed first try

Sand dams washed away in 1992 and 1998. The 2005 dam was built stronger and paid for properly.

Try this: If a plan fails, ask what was missing, such as money, strength or time. Fix that first.

3 Watch for small signs of recovery

In Tastubek, the houses grew from 9 to 34.

Try this: Pick one small number that shows progress. Write it down each year.

4 Keep protecting a win

The catch fell in 2025, and illegal fishing was reported.

Try this: After a success, set one simple rule to protect it. Review it every year.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

You cannot always save everything, but you can save something.

Sources

National Geographic
Once Written Off for Dead, the Aral Sea Is Now Full of Life (2018)

Global Voices
How Kazakhstan resurrected the North Aral Sea (2026)

Wikipedia
Dike Kokaral

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story and differ on figures. Dam length: Wikipedia says 12 km, Global Voices 13 km, National Geographic eight miles; the story says about 12 kilometres. Completion: summer 2005 (National Geographic), August 2005 (Wikipedia). The World Bank paid for most of a project worth nearly $86 million, and the water rose by 11 feet in seven months against an expected three years (National Geographic). That the sea was split into a northern and a southern part, and that there was not enough water to save all of it, is from Global Voices. The two earlier sand dams, washed away in 1992 and 1998, are from Wikipedia. Fishing: commercial harvests fell to zero by 1987, salt fell from 30 to 8 grams per litre, the catch grew from 1,360 tons in 2006 to 7,106 tons in 2016, and the village of Tastubek had 90 houses, then 9 in the mid-1990s, then 34 in 2018 (all National Geographic; “almost two dozen species” of freshwater fish returned, which the story rounds to “about 20 kinds”). Global Voices gives a peak catch before the 1960s of 80 thousand tons; National Geographic says 48,000 tons in 1957; the story uses neither. Global Voices says the catch reached 8,000 tons at its best and fell from 7.8 to 3.9 thousand tons in 2025; other outlets may count differently, and we could not open a primary fisheries source. How far the shore moved from Aralsk differs between sources (about 100 km in Wikipedia, 40 km in Global Voices), so the story gives no number. The 2025 water-volume figures and the planned second phase of the dam are in Global Voices and are not used here. The quote is from Madi Zhasekenov, as printed by National Geographic. Kidirbai Ibragimov’s words and numbers are from National Geographic. The claim that the dam “sealed the fate” of the South Aral is Wikipedia’s wording. The World Bank’s own page could not be opened. The first pin shows Aralsk and the second the Kokaral Dam. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.