

# Tourism Possibilities based on Natural and Cultural Heritage in Aral Sea

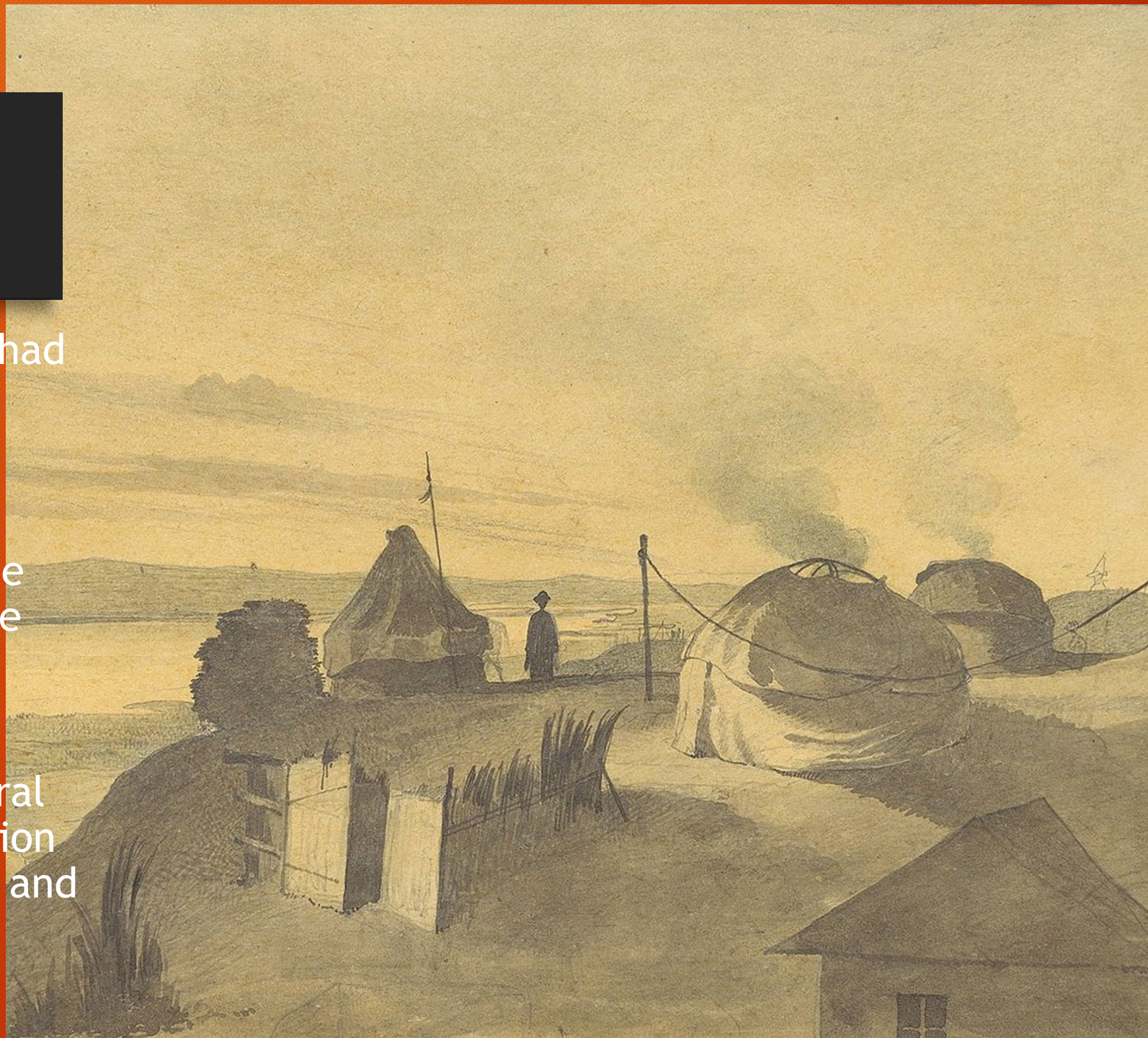
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3rd International Conference on the Aral Sea Region  
Zoological Institute of R.A.S.  
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# 1. Introduction

- The shrinking of the Aral Sea has had a profound impact on the local communities and their way of life.
- Efforts are ongoing to mitigate the environmental damage and preserve the cultural heritage of the region.
- Tourism is an economic and cultural activity that can hold local population in situ, offering them some income and entrepreneurial activity.





## 2. Some facts on Aral Sea

- The Aral Sea, once the fourth-largest lake in the world, has unfortunately shrunk dramatically.
- The rivers that fed it were diverted by irrigation projects.
- By 2007, it had declined to 10% of its original size, splitting into four lakes:
  - the North Aral Sea,
  - the South Aral Sea, with the Eastern and Western basins
  - the small intermediate Barsakelmes Lake.
- By 2009, the SouthEastern lake had almost disappeared, while occasional water flows have sometimes replenished it to a small degree
- The SouthWestern lake retreated to a thin strip at the western edge of the former southern sea.
- By in August 2014 the SouthEastern basin of the Aral had completely dried up. It is now called the Aralkum Desert.
- In a Kazakhstani effort to save and replenish the North Aral Sea, the Dike Kokaral dam was completed in 2005.
- By 2008, the water level had risen to 42 m, about 12 m above that of 2003.
- As of 2013, salinity dropped, and today several species of fish are again present, except sturgeon, in sufficient numbers for fishing.



### 3. Potential for Tourism Development

- In the Aral Region there are many specific sites with
  - human-made cultural heritage and/or
  - specific natural monumental resources
- Such assets can possibly have a Tourism development potential,
  - That can strengthen and vitalise the local societies
  - Can keep local Economy, Skills and Traditions alive



Taras Shevchenko: Fort Rayim from Sur Darya, 1848



## 4. Uzbekistan side

### 4.1 Muynak (1)

- Muynak, is a city in northern Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan. It was a port city on the shores of the Aral Sea.
- Muynak is now located about 150 kilometers from the water in the Aralkum Desert.
- Muynak was the largest fishing port in Central Asia, with a thriving fishing industry and canning facilities





## 4. Uzbekistan side

### 4.1 Muynak (2)

- Ship Graveyard in Muynak
  - One of the most striking features of Muynak is the ship graveyard, where rusting fishing vessels lie abandoned on the dry seabed





## 4. Uzbekistan side

### 4.1 Muynak (3)

- Stihia Festival in Muynak
  - Since 2018, Muynak has hosted the Stihia Festival, the largest electronic music festival in Central Asia, attracting thousands of visitors
- Souvenirs
  - Visitors can find souvenirs such as traditional skullcaps, wallets, and scarves with national patterns.





# 4. Uzbekistan side

## 4.1 Muynak (4)

- Regional Studies Museum in Muynak
- Established in 1984 in the Uchsay port village. In 1998 it was moved to the Community Centre of Muynak District. In 2013 the museum was reconstructed.
- It provides insights into the history and cultural heritage of the Aral Sea and its environmental impact and the efforts to mitigate the damage.
- The museum's collection includes beautiful paintings by Rafael Matevosyan and Faim Madgazin from the 60's and 70's.





## 4. Uzbekistan side

### 4.2 Mizdarkhan (1)

- Mizdarkhan, is an ancient necropolis and archaeological site located in Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan. It is located about 15 kilometers west of Nukus and 4 kilometers from the town of Khojeyli.
- It was founded around the 4th century. It was inhabited for approximately 1,700 years until the 14th century. After being depopulated, Mizdarkhan became a sacred burial site.
- Mizdarkhan Cultural Blend: is one of Zoroastrian and Islamic traditions, with burial sites and artifacts from both religions.





## 4. Uzbekistan side

### 4.2 Mizdarkhan (2)

- . Fire Temple and Palace Ruins: that can be found within the fortress.
- Zoroastrian Cemetery: Opposite the fortress, there's a hill with the original Zoroastrian cemetery, where bodies were left to be consumed by birds of prey.
- Adam's Mausoleum Gyaur-Kala Fortress: Local legend says that Adam's grave is located here, and pilgrims often add bricks to the structure to prevent it from collapsing.
- Mazlumkhan-Sulu Mausoleum: A restored mausoleum dating back to the 12th-14th centuries, known for its unique underground cross-shaped hall





## 4. Uzbekistan side

### 4.3 Kurgancha-Kala

- Built in the 13th century, it served as a refuge and outpost for caravans.
- Located 100 km northwest of Muynak. This stone citadel stands on one of the medium ledges of the Ustyurt Plateau. It served as a frontier outpost on the northern borders of Khorezm, and possibly as the last caravanserai for merchants daring to cross the Ustyurt Plateau.
- The exact history of Kurgancha-Kala remains a mystery. Its construction began in the 12th century and concluded in the early 13th century, right before the Mongol army led by Genghis Khan invaded the region. The Mongol troops never reached this fortress.
- Research indicates that Kurgancha-Kala continued to function until the 14th century and has since gradually deteriorated. A yurt camp for tourists is now located nearby.





## 5. Ustyurt Plateau (1)

- Ustyurt Plateau is a vast, semi-desert region that spans across Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Its area is approximately 200,000 square kilometers.
- It is a quite flat region, with elevation ranging from 160 meters to 200 meters, with the highest point reaching 370 meters. The plateau is bordered by steep cliffs called "chinks," which are nearly 100 meters high and have multicolored layers of limestone and chalk.
- It features unusual rock formations, including isolated mountains and complex shapes created by erosion.





## 5. Ustyurt Plateau (2)

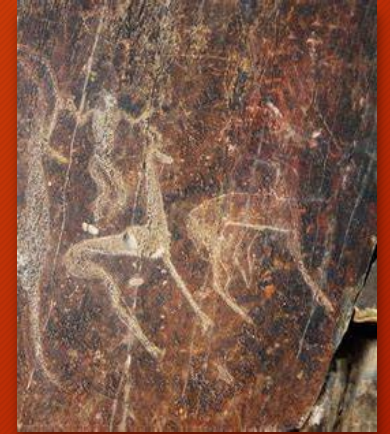
- The climate on the Ustyurt is desert-like and dry, with rare precipitation. Summers are long and very hot, often with daytime temperatures exceeding 40 degrees Celsius. Winters are cold with little snow, and due to winds on open spaces, very unpleasant. Therefore, the best time to visit the Ustyurt Plateau is April, May, September, and October.
- Traveling to the Ustyurt Plateau requires adherence to standard safety requirements for trips in wild desert territories. The journey involves steep ascents and descents, and vehicles can fall into voids. Dangers from desert rodents and other animals or get stuck in mud if you get too close to the current shore of the Aral Sea.
- Additionally, outdated GPS tracks for the Ustyurt trip found online may lead to now-destroyed roads and collapsed descents from the plateau. It's best to rely on local drivers who are well acquainted with the Aralkum desert and all approaches to the Ustyurt Plateau.





## 5. Ustyurt Natural Reserve

- The Ustyurt Nature Reserve in Kazakhstan preserves rare fauna such as the Ustyurt Mountain sheep and the Saiga antelope. The Ustyurt Nature Reserve was established in 1984 to protect the unique flora and fauna of the region. The plateau has important Cultural Significance, as it has been inhabited since the Neolithic era, with evidence of early human settlements related to the Kelteminar culture.
- Ancient rock carvings - Petroglyphs- can be found on the plateau, depicting scenes of hunting, animals, and daily life of the ancient inhabitants.
- Touring of the plateau is available by several tour companies offering jeep tours that cover the highlights of the Aral Sea region. Besides, for a bird's-eye view of the Martian-like landscapes and the remnants of the sea, helicopter tours are available.





# 6. Kazakhstan side

## 6.1 Aralsk (1)

- Aralsk is a town in southwestern Kazakhstan, located in the Kyzylorda region. Aralsk is quite remote, about 1,000 kilometers from Nur-Sultan and 1,400 kilometers from Almaty
- The area was originally a village called Alty-Kuduk (Six Wells) in 1817. Development began with the construction of the Orenburg-Tashkent railway between 1899 and 1905.
- Aralsk has been a thriving fishing port on the banks of the Aral Sea, supplying fish to the surrounding regions. Since the 1960s, the Aral Sea has been shrinking and Aralsk is now landlocked, about 12 kilometers from the northern remnant of the Aral Sea.
- A sailboat sculpture above an anchor sits in a small garden in the town center.





## 6. Kazakhstan side

### 6.1 Aralsk (2)

- Aralsk has several disused factories and a dusty, desert landscape, however, there is still life on the streets, with camels and locals going about their daily activities.
- The town has a few hotels, a small museum, and some preserved old fishing boats at the old port area offering a glimpse into the town's past.





## 6. Kazakhstan side

### 6.1 Aralsk (3)

Aralsk Fisherman's Museum is located near Aralsk's former harbor, close to the town center. It is a small but significant attraction that offers a glimpse into the town's fishing history. The museum features several fishing boats displayed on pedestals, with the largest boat being refurbished, allowing visitors to climb up on deck.

- The museum also showcases various fishing gear used by the fishermen of the Aral Sea. There are also historical photographs and paintings from Soviet times, providing a visual history of the area. Finally, a 10-minute video is available, offering additional insights into the fishing industry and the impact of the shrinking Aral Sea.
- History museum, with various paintings, jars preserving fish of Aral and a diorama of the battle of Aral in 1919.





# 6. Kazakhstan side

## 6.1 Aralsk (4)

- Hot Springs
- **Medicinal Hot Springs:** Near Aralsk, there are hot springs that are known for their mineral-rich waters. They are a popular attraction for visitors seeking therapeutic benefits but also to relax and enjoy the therapeutic effects of the warm, mineral-infused water .
- Radon springs have emerged in the bottom of Aral sea near Aralsk, Kazakhstan
- The best time to visit is during the spring and summer months when the weather is more favorable. The temperatures are milder, making the hot springs more enjoyable. A quieter experience is visiting during the weekdays rather than weekends

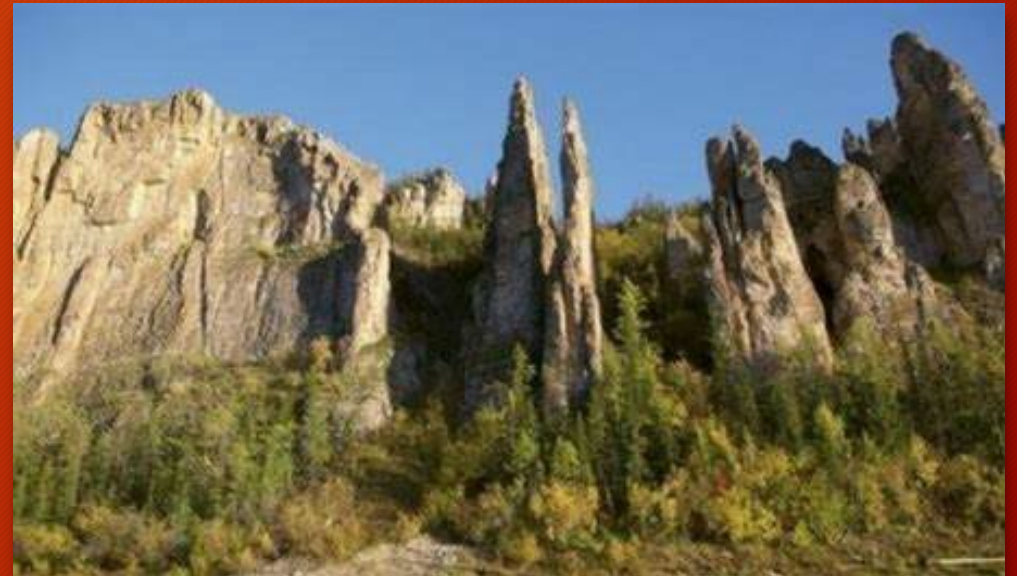




## 6. Kazakhstan side

### 6.2 Barsakelmes Nature Reserve

- Barsakelmes Nature Reserve: It is a fascinating wildlife refuge located on the former island of Barsa-Kelmes in the Kyzylorda Region of Kazakhstan. A protected area with unique flora and fauna. Also, there is a large library.
- Flora: The reserve is home to around 250 species of plants, including colorful tulips, Calligonum, and saxaul.
- Fauna: The reserve hosts 56 species of animals, including the Transcaspian wild ass, goitered gazelle, corsac fox, and Eurasian wolf. There are also 203 bird species in the area.
- Research: joint research by scientific institutes is regularly conducted on its territory, aimed at maintaining and studying the reserve's ecosystems, and understanding climate change, desertification, and biosphere formation.
- Barsakelmes is extremely remote, with basic roads, making it essential to travel with a guide for safety.





## 6. Kazakhstan side

### 6.2 Kerderi

- Kerderi: a 12th-century mausoleum influenced by Islamic culture with elements of shamanism and tengrism, is situated on the former seabed, 170 km southwest of Aralsk.
- Objects from Kerderi have been carbon-dated to as late as the start of the sixteenth century and historical evidence suggests that the Aral Sea began slowly refilling after 1570, when the Amu Darya river resumed its flow into the Aral.

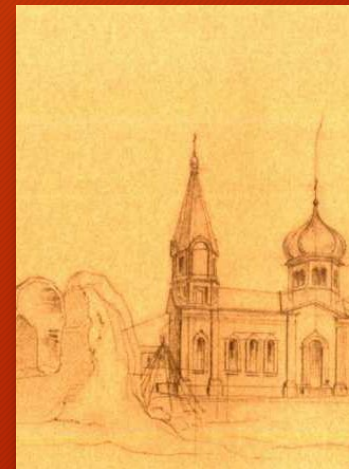




# 6. Kazakhstan side

## 6.3 Raim Fortress (Rayim)

- Fort Raim (Rayim)- The remnants of a Russian fortress can still be found at the point where the Syr Darya flows into the Aral Sea. Today, it stands as ruins and eroded walls, located 100 km south of Aralsk
- The construction of the fort caused conflict with the Khanate of Khiva and the Khanate of Kokand, who inhabited the lower Syr Daria region. The Kokandians, under Yaqub Beg attacked the Kazakhs. The commander of Fort Raim, Lieutenant-Colonel Erofeev sent out patrols to protect the Kazakhs but these were only temporarily successful
- A Russian force afterwards captured the Khokandian fort at Ak-Mechet, which was renamed Fort Perovsky, after General Vasily Perovsky who commanded the assault.
- Russia afterwards planned to extend its line of forts from Raim, but was interrupted by the Crimean War (1853-56).
- General Obruchev started a Russian settlement at the site in 1849 when the families of 25 of his soldiers were brought there.
- Fort Raim as of Today. Paintings by Taras Shevchenko





# Tourism Possibilities based on Natural and Cultural Heritage in Aral Sea

## Conclusions

- Aral Sea has unique natural heritage sites. Some are enlisted as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.
- There are also many historic man-made monuments that worth visiting, by international tourists.
- There are some Tour Operators organising 2-5 day trips to the Aral Area, with 4x4 vehicles and Helicopters
- The supporting infrastructure is still very basic or non-existent
- Tourism can offer income, employment, safety, infrastructure, innovation, resilience and robustness to local communities

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**Ustyurt Nature Reserve, Kazakhstan**

IUCN category Ia (strict nature reserve)



**Location** Kyzylorda Region, Kazakhstan

**Coordinates** 45°38'07"N 59°54'30"E

**Area** 160 826 ha

**Established** 1939

**UNESCO World Heritage Site**

**Official name** Cold Winter Deserts of Turan

**Type** Natural


**Criteria** ix, x

**Designated** 2023 (45th session)

**Reference no.** 1693<sup>[1]</sup>

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*Thank You - Спасибо*