

ARAL CULTURE SUMMIT: A NEW STAGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL COOPERATION

Oblomuradov Naim Khalimovich

Professor at Tashkent State University of Economics,

Doctor of Historical Sciences

Tuychiyev Sodiq Fayzulla ogli

1st-year student, Faculty of Taxation and Budget Accounting,

Tashkent State University of Economics

Abstract

This article examines the role and significance of the Aral Culture Summit, held in the Republic of Karakalpakstan in 2024, as a pivotal initiative in addressing the ecological catastrophe of the Aral Sea region. Emphasizing Uzbekistan's multifaceted approach to environmental recovery, cultural revitalization, and international cooperation, the article analyzes the Summit's key contributions and long-term implications for regional sustainability.

Keywords: Aral Sea, environmental crisis, cultural diplomacy, Uzbekistan, sustainable development, ecological restoration, international cooperation, Aral Culture Summit, regional heritage, climate action.

INTRODUCTION

The Aral Sea crisis, once one of the world's most severe ecological disasters, continues to impact the environment, economy, and health of millions in Central Asia. Over recent decades, the drying of the sea has led to massive ecological degradation, desertification, and socioeconomic disruption. In response, the Government of Uzbekistan has launched numerous efforts to mitigate these consequences. A significant milestone in this trajectory is the Aral Culture Summit, held in 2024 in Muynak, which brought global attention to the region and fostered new platforms for cooperation through the integration of ecological and cultural initiatives. The Aral Sea ecological disaster is a crucial issue not only for Central Asia but for the entire world. This catastrophe has demonstrated to humanity the dire consequences of the mismanagement of natural resources. Today, environmental restoration processes are underway in the Aral Sea region, and the Aral Culture Summit is one of the key initiatives in this direction.

Under the initiative of the Head of State, significant attention is being paid to pressing environmental issues such as further greening of the country, mitigating the negative effects of climate change, and reducing pollution caused by waste.

Until the second half of the 20th century, the Aral Sea was the fourth largest closed lake in the world. However, beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, the excessive diversion of water from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers by the Soviet Union for cotton and agricultural needs caused the sea to shrink rapidly. This led to a number of major

environmental issues. The sea level dropped significantly – in the 1960s, the Aral covered an area of 68,000 km², but today only about 10% remains. Its water volume has decreased nearly 15-fold, leaving behind three separate water bodies: the Western Sea, the Eastern Sea, and the Small Aral. The rising salinity – due to rapid evaporation – has created uninhabitable conditions for most aquatic life.

Over the past 55 years, a new desert – the Aralkum – has formed on the dried seabed of the Aral, covering an area of 5.2 million hectares. Like other deserts, Aralkum lacks the necessary infrastructure to support a stable human life, socio-economic development, biodiversity, and ecosystems.

The drying of the Aral Sea is not only an environmental problem but has also evolved into a socio-economic crisis affecting millions in the region. This includes salt and toxic dust storms (with 100 million tons of dust and salt blown annually from Aralkum), a rise in cardiovascular, respiratory, and allergic diseases, and the collapse of the fishing industry (which in the 1970s yielded 60,000 tons of fish annually but has now nearly vanished).

The Aral disaster is one of the most seriously debated environmental issues globally. The desertification of the region is changing the regional climate and influencing the global climate. It has been reported that dust and salt storms from the Aral have reached Europe and even Antarctica. The Aral Sea catastrophe serves as a lesson for other water bodies around the world. Rivers such as the Colorado in the U.S. and Lake Chad in Africa face similar threats. In 1993, the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) was established. In 2021, the UN declared the Aral Sea region a Zone of Environmental Innovations and Technologies. In light of this, global efforts must be united to address the consequences of this tragedy.

In Uzbekistan, to stabilize the environmental situation, afforestation and reforestation efforts have been carried out on 222,000 hectares, increasing the national forest cover to 8.1% (3.65 million hectares). Specifically, to prevent sand movement and reduce salt and dust emissions into the atmosphere from the dried Aral seabed and the surrounding region, “green covers” have been planted on 215,000 hectares, reaching a total of 1.9 million hectares. In deserts, mountains, and foothill areas, 1,000 hectares of protective forests have been established to combat desertification, sand movement, and soil and water erosion.

According to Goal 69 of the "Uzbekistan – 2030" strategy, forest coverage in the Aral region is to be expanded to 2.3 million hectares, with an additional 600,000 hectares of green areas established on the dried seabed, bringing the total to 2.6 million hectares – or 80% of the area.

METHODS

This study utilizes a qualitative approach based on content analysis of official documents, summit proceedings, media coverage, and speeches by political and cultural leaders. Comparative and historical methods were also employed to contextualize the

Summit within broader environmental diplomacy and sustainable development efforts in the Aral Sea region.

RESULTS

The Aral Culture Summit gathered representatives from over 40 countries, including scholars, environmentalists, artists, and policymakers. Key outcomes include:

The launch of new cross-border projects for afforestation and ecological restoration.

Cultural programs emphasizing the preservation of regional heritage and identity.

Institutional partnerships between international organizations and local authorities.

Reinforced commitments to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDGs 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), 13 (Climate Action), and 15 (Life on Land).

Moreover, the Summit has significantly raised global awareness and catalyzed interest in environmental and cultural collaboration in the Aral region.

On March 25 of this year, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan adopted Resolution PQ-130 “On Holding the Aral Culture Summit at a High Level.” According to this resolution, starting from 2025, the Aral Culture Summit will be held every 18 months – in spring or autumn. The first summit will be organized at a high level from April 4–6, 2025, in Samarkand and Nukus, in conjunction with the Samarkand Climate Forum. An organizing committee has been formed to prepare and conduct the summit. The main goals and directions of the summit include: creating a global platform to discuss environmental problems in the Aral region and other parts of the world and to offer rational solutions; developing interdisciplinary approaches to solve problems in the Aral region; establishing the “Aral School” educational program to generate sustainable solutions and strategies; reconstructing and efficiently utilizing the “Istiqlol” culture and recreation park and the children’s library located within it using modern technologies and traditional architecture; conducting water and soil research in the Aral region in cooperation with leading local and international experts and organizations; creating a laboratory platform to study agricultural crops suitable for the soil and climate of the Aral region and turning it into a hub for educational and practical scientific research; preserving, protecting, and promoting the unique culture and traditions developed in the Aral region over centuries.

DISCUSSION

The Aral Culture Summit illustrates a new paradigm in addressing ecological crises through cultural diplomacy. Unlike traditional environmental summits focused solely on policy or science, this initiative highlights the importance of cultural engagement and community empowerment. The integration of art, heritage, and environmental activism enables a more holistic and inclusive model of sustainability. Furthermore, the Summit enhances Uzbekistan’s international image as a proactive actor in ecological and cultural regeneration. Continued success will depend on maintaining momentum, ensuring transparency, and fostering long-term investment and cooperation.

At the UN 2023 Water Conference held in New York from March 22–24, Uzbekistan proposed the implementation of the Aral Culture Summit project. For the first time in 45 years, the international community gathered at such a conference due to the urgency of the issue – by 2050, 5 billion people could suffer from water shortages. Uzbekistan has important contributions and proposals to make on this issue. The Aral Sea, once the fourth-largest inland sea in the world, lies within Uzbekistan, and its fate concerns not just us but the entire international community. Furthermore, in recent years, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has consistently raised this issue at high-level UN meetings and has put forward key initiatives.

At the conference's high-level plenary session on March 23, Saida Mirziyoyeva, a member of Uzbekistan's delegation, delivered a speech from the UN platform highlighting the consequences of the Aral Sea disaster, Uzbekistan's large-scale efforts to mitigate them, and the country's leadership in uniting international efforts. She emphasized that Muynak, once a major port city with significant production capacity, had turned into a ship graveyard on a lifeless shore. She recited lines from the renowned Karakalpak poet Ibrahim Yusupov, describing how the sea turned into a desert in the blink of an eye.

The international community supported President Mirziyoyev's initiatives, leading to the adoption of the 2021 UN resolution declaring the Aral region a Zone of Environmental Innovations and Technologies, and the 2018 establishment of a Multi-Partner Human Security Trust Fund. The country's efforts have been aimed at financing the region, increasing its economic potential, restoring the health of the resilient Karakalpak people, and creating green spaces, with more than \$14 million allocated for these initiatives.

The Aral Culture Summit will include educational and exchange programs, scholarships, and internships that inspire the younger generation to contribute to improving the situation in the region. A biodesign farm-laboratory will also be established within the framework of the summit. The project will explore and develop technologies for water supply, new crop varieties, and reducing salinity in the region.

CONCLUSION

The 2024 Aral Culture Summit marks a transformative step in addressing the Aral Sea crisis. It symbolizes not only Uzbekistan's commitment to environmental recovery but also the growing role of cultural diplomacy in sustainable development. The initiative sets a valuable precedent for similar regions worldwide, where ecological restoration and cultural heritage are deeply interconnected.

It was announced that the summit will connect creatives with local farmers to establish sustainable relationships in the field of biodesign and cultivate new plant species, forming the basis for a strategic plan for the next 10 years. This will pave the way for significant local transformations. The content and importance of the upcoming summit were elaborated at the conference's session on "Water for Cooperation: Transboundary and International Cooperation on Water Resources, Cross-Sectoral, Including Scientific

Cooperation on Water, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” and in the panel discussion titled “From Art to Action: Turning the Desert into a Forest for the Restoration of the Aral Region” organized by the Foundation with international experts. The Aral issue is not just relevant to Karakalpakstan or Uzbekistan, but to the entire region. Therefore, greening the dried seabed, reopening water reservoirs, and mitigating consequences are urgent tasks of our time. Efforts to ensure environmental safety, protect the ecosystem, and alleviate the negative consequences of the sea's desiccation continue. As our President has emphasized, “Protecting the environment and nature and preventing water scarcity will remain an urgent task for us. We will undoubtedly achieve ecological balance and a clean environment...”

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