

RESURRECTION ISLAND: UPDATE June 2020

Scoping trip May, 19-24



Sites visited:

- Resurrection Island (steppe site), May, 19-21
- Muynak, Uchsai (villages), May, 22-24

Kontubek, or Aralsk-7 (the town on Resurrection Island) - no longer exists. The remains of the town have been demolished in accordance with the decision of the state authorities. At the moment the area looks like steppe with remains of some constructions. State development plan is to restore this area focusing on soil restoration and planting saxaul. We observed a lot of garbage and still can't fully believe that the town has been totally demolished.



Biological survey.

We worked in three monitoring sites where the work was previously conducted in 2016-17. These are 1) Chink-1, 2) Port and 3) Zero kilometer. Also, we visited Lazarev Island for the short time. An outcome includes additional discoveries of animal species which can be found on the core island – the following new/endorsed species were added: caracal, corsac fox, marbled polecat, even-fingered gecko, steppe cat. We also recorded a lot of hares, fox, passerines, not many rodents (gerbils, jerboas) - because of the natural depression, sets and fresh tracks of Asian badger, wolf and boar. We recorded flamingos, eagle owls, common kestrels, tortoises, lizards etc. We were not able to record some endangered raptors we recorded before (e.g. golden eagle and lesser kestrel), because their habitats and nesting places (urban construction and towers) have been demolished.

Fauna of Zero kilometer is made up of sandy desert. There we recorded common, widely distributed species as hares, fox, steppe cats, tortoises and lizards, and such sandy desert species as Toad-headed Agama and Northern three-toed jerboa. In addition, we found LARGE quantities of fossils of mollusks and echinoderms.

Additional notes:

Chink-1 consists of interesting areas covered by fossils and geological creatures - strange-looking stones. Generally, this site looks like chalk period geo-park (pic.1 A.) and generally could be recommended as a site to study natural history science.

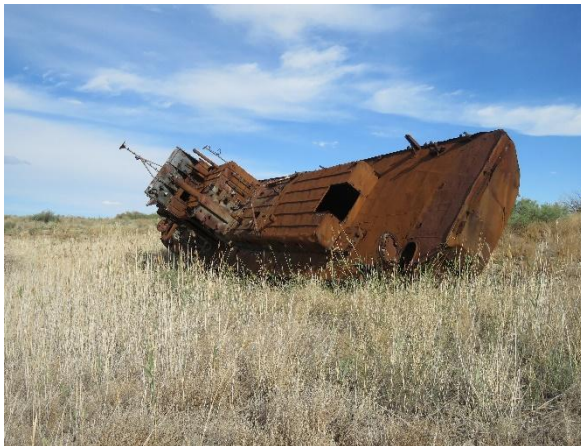
Port still has a water-body with water birds (some plovers, gulls, ducks, flamingos (just migrated), old ships (they're used commonly by owl eagles for rest and nests) and ruins of port's buildings (pier, electric station used by bats and kestrels) and destroyed roads (pic 1.B). Here we found boars and wolves hunting them. We don't know what the government plans for this area, yet, it would be worthwhile to conserve this area as a natural and historic site.

Zero kilometer a sandy area located close to a site where saigas are still found (Lazarev –Aral Sea bank) – see below.





A



B

Forestation initiatives – currently there are large scale plans to populate the area with various vegetation. The desert plants are: saxaul – *Haloxylon aphyllum*, tamarix – *Tamarix ramosissima*, saisola – *Halastachys belangerina*. The planting of those has already been done in parts of Aral Sea – the almost totally dry bottom, some parts of saline land of Vozrozhdenie and sandy dunes of Lazarev Island.

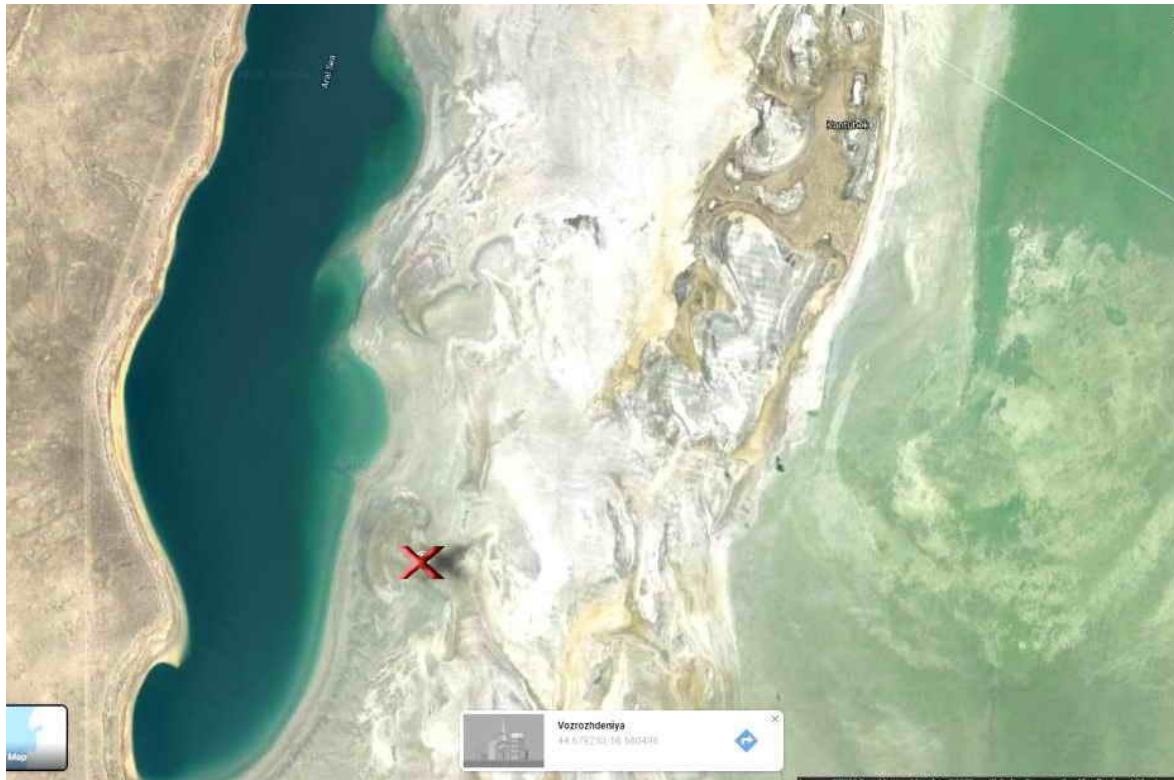


saxaul plantation of 2019

vs. saxaul plantation of 2012

We observed plantations of 2008, 2010, 2012, 2018 and 2019. Survival of planted vegetation varies; it appears that planting of 2018-2019 was not very successful. The majority of the region is not suitable for driving because of the furrows. Also, water holes were dug but they did not serve their purpose as planned. We didn't witness it, but people we interviewed suggested that the area is empty - no plants or any kind of shelters for animals. In Zero km and later in Muynak we met foresters from Muynak forestry farm. They indicated that the afforestation plan started in Soviet time, and they will continue working on that in the coming years too. Local people collect seeds of desert plants and plant those as well as saxaul saplings produced by forestry farms. Overall, this looks like a big campaign coordinated by the state. Some sites look like mitigation work (planting) was done well, while others look like the work there was carried out unprofessionally just for the sake of reporting and delivering quick (yet unsustainable) results. Some of the beautiful landscapes (e.g. white sandy dunes in Lazarev) were transformed into planting areas.

Saiga – we didn't record saigas in Vozrozhdenie but collected data from locals who previously gave us guidance on where the saigas could be found. Our informants Ajibai and his son (who is involved in Artemia business and travels a lot in the area around the year) confirmed that in the last two years saiga (at least 30 animals) were consistently spotted in Lazarev-Aral Sea site. They said poachers have a hard time accessing the area because of the forest furrows (see map below).



Contacts with local authorities – We had a meeting with local governor (he’s from Nukus) who is very much in favor of sustainability and protected areas. There is a lack of understanding of what these concepts mean, yet, because Uzbek authorities are keen on improving the ecological situation in Aral Sea, the local authorities seem quite supportive and open to suggestions. They approved the idea to conduct socioeconomic surveys in summer and even offered facilitation support. They are also keen to have us present a series of lectures about sustainability and our work when we come back in the summer.

Demographic data – after speaking to the local authorities we’ve received the official set of demographic data concerning Muynak town. The information is in Uzbek so we will need to hire a translator to translate important bits into Russian. Currently we’re working on having a brief translation of the table of contents to identify areas that would be useful for the project activities.

Tourism sector – we initiated contact with a local tour operator Dilfuza. She is a representative of Muinak hotel ‘Rotmina’ group, www.hotel-ratmina.uz and tour agency “Nitsa-Nukus Tour”. She gave insights into the state of the industry in the region at the moment and desired prospective plans. Interestingly enough she’s a person from the region and truly interested in helping Muynak region (if we think of sustainable development) as opposed to having people from Nukus or Tashkent that are primarily interested in getting direct profit and not so much in the region. She is open to collaboration, supports the idea of sustainable tourism including extreme one; she showed what kinds of handicrafts are available in the region and confirmed that there is a big interest and support for tourism development in Aral Sea.

‘Stihia’ music festival – turns out to be a very disappointing event for the locals but attracts a lot of tourists from the West, Russia and Tashkent. The festival is dedicated to electronic music with no extra activities scheduled on the side. Logistics of the festival and the set up are ok, yet the music and behavior of attendees perceived as a strange by the locals.

Brief social surveys - we followed a simple interview structure. We interviewed local authority representatives, market workers, a school teacher and a tour operator. The full records of the interviews will be available in English and shared shortly.

FINAL COMMENTS & CONSIDERATIONS:

1. Over the past two years, the situation has changed: the planting campaign began, which led to growing afforestation and, if the efforts are successful not only that will fix the soil on the exposed sea floor and prevent future disasters, but also will create a kind of a 'green corridor' that will allow animals to move from the mainland to the islands and back.
2. However, during these two years there was a lot of equipment and people on the drain and on the island. This has created a lot of disturbance for animals. Furthermore, it also seems that the need to accommodate the equipment and enable the planned works were the main reason for destruction of the military town on Resurrection Island, to ensure the safety of the workers.
3. Currently, there are border guards on Resurrection island again and people are not allowed to visit. Afforestation works were completed in April 2020. It's rather good news, as the flow of looters and poachers has been stopped. However, the military town was fully demolished, which before presented an opportunity for urban tourism.
4. Despite all the changes, the natural ecosystems on the islands are still preserved as well as the unique landscapes and the port. A small group of saigas inhabits the area close to the islands – the area is nearly impossible to access using means of transportation. The desertification process continues.
5. Local residents and the leadership of the district have a positive attitude towards the idea of organizing a protected area on Resurrection island. However, as interviews show, people have a very limited understanding about the island and the species inhabiting it.
6. In Muynak and the region as a whole, ecology and development of tourism are the major priorities. There, the post of deputy governor (hakim) in ecology was established for the first time since the existence of the region. All that created favorable condition for further conservation work.

Next steps (August 2020):

1. Conduct socioeconomic surveys.
2. Take a short trip to saiga habitats on the Aral Sea along with a guide and inspect the well on the Island.
3. Meet with border services and the State Ecology Committee in order to clarify the regime and organization of visits to the border areas of the island.
4. Organise awareness raising around biodiversity and the key inhabitants of Muynak region generally and the natural and historic heritage of Resurrection Island.