

Green initiative educates local communities to save shrinking Aral Sea in Uzbekistan

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The Aral desert in Uzbekistan and the people who live there are the focus of a programme which aims to encourage sustainable living in the Aral Sea region through building the capacity of teachers, empowering local communities and mobilizing young people.

The Green Belt in Aral Desert programme, which began in 2014, was among nominees for the 2019 UNESCO-Japan Prize on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which rewards outstanding projects as part of UNESCO's wider work on ESD.

Run by the Center for Innovative Technologies and Environmental Innovations in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, the programme functions as a platform and network to connect higher educational institutes in the country working on sustainability issues. It also implements more than 20 environmental projects including developing environmentally sustainable transport, using alternative fuels and reducing the impact of road transport on the ecosystem.

Health is one of the particular focuses of the project. The Aral region in Uzbekistan has been hit by both climate change and the unsustainable use of water causing the sea in large parts to become a desert over time. Inhabitants suffer not only from poverty, but a high level of respiratory disease and cancers caused by dust and soil toxins, as well as from poor quality water and nutrition caused by low household income. Women of childbearing age and children are particularly affected by illnesses including goiter, anemia, and kidney disease

with eye complaints also common. As a result, the region has high rates of mortality for the general population and children in particular.

Project Manager Professor Yusufjan Shadimetov said: 'The overall aim of the project is to not only protect the environment and reverse erosion but improve the welfare of people living in this region. We do this through a wide range of initiatives including the promotion of yurt-based ecotourism to visit the dry seabed and its abandoned ships, the replanting of trees and special shrubs which are salt tolerant and which curb soil erosion and degradation, and through teaching people how to use less water more efficiently using innovative technology.'

The project works by involving local authorities and approaching mahalla committees (mahallas are a local government definition of small local communities), young activists and by connecting more than 20 higher education institutions and 50 research centres. So far it has built the capacity of more than 1 million youth, trained more than 100,000 people in forest planting on the dried seabed, developed more than 100 ecotourism routes and created a School of Young Farmers with an emphasis on sustainable land use and food security. In addition, it runs rural schools using ICT to conduct lessons.

Education is delivered through special training programmes and educational and methodological recommendations based on the UN Sustainable Development Agenda, the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism, and the Sustainable Development Concept of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Content focuses on introducing the principles of sustainable development into the educational process, such as economic mechanisms for natural resources management, environmental management, ecotourism, green economy, environmental logistics, agroecology, etc.

A social entrepreneurship programme encourages employment in agro-business as well as the use of alternative types of fuel and the reduction of waste burning. Environmental events such as large-scale tree planting and sanitary cleanups are undertaken. Low-income families are further helped through charitable concerts and ethnocultural festivals with the participation of foreign tourists.

Ecofestivals dedicated to World Environment Day, Earth Day, Water Day, and educational seminars on environmental health, community culture, and the formation of a healthy lifestyle are regularly held.

A special focus is placed on the Muynak community who live at the heart of the region. Their culture and environmental initiatives are celebrated each year with a Spring festival which shares their lifestyle with a wider audience.

‘This is a traditional fishing community where the aim is to further develop animal husbandry and tourism,’ said Professor Shadimetov.

Through the project, more than 10,000 Muynak people have been provided with clean drinking water facilities and received training on water use and in particular crop irrigation. The project also runs a Health Train which brings doctors to the region to undergo training before working with the community.

Currently, on the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan, large-scale work has begun on landscaping the dry bottom of the Aral Sea.

Education for Sustainable Development empowers people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and behaviour needed to think and act for a sustainable future. It is also about including sustainable development issues, such as climate change and biodiversity into teaching and learning. UNESCO promotes ESD at all levels and in all social contexts.

In Uzbekistan, UNESCO works to promote sustainable livelihoods for local communities, namely through the development of sustainable tourism and traditional crafts, as well as the promotion of cultural and natural heritage.

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