

RESURRECTION ISLAND SAFEGUARDING ONE OF THE WILDEST PLACES ON OUR PLANET



The Saiga Conservation Alliance's new

RESURRECTION ISLAND PROGRAM

About Resurrection Island

Resurrection Island is located in the Aral Sea region, which straddles the borders of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. During the Soviet period, the area changed dramatically.

The Aral Sea almost entirely disappeared (to be replaced by a new desert) as a result of gigantic irrigation programs, starting in the 1950s, which diverted the two rivers feeding into it. The resulting Aral Sea crisis is now widely considered one of the greatest man-made environmental disasters in the world. No longer an island, Resurrection Island is surrounded by exposed seabed, covered in a thick layer of salts and pesticides. The seabed has proven extremely resistant to revegetation, and large dust storms regularly spread the toxic salts and pesticides widely across the region, with severe long-term negative impacts on human health, agriculture and wildlife.

Nevertheless, the fauna of Resurrection Island still remains rich. It includes approximately 130 species of animals, including the Saiga Antelope, Caracal, Central Asian Tortoise, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Lesser Kestrel and Rosy Flamingo . All of these species are listed in both the global IUCN Red List and the Red Data Book of Uzbekistan. The flora of Resurrection Island includes 123 species of plants. Certain plant communities have practically disappeared from the surrounding deserts, but are thus far still flourishing on Resurrection Island. Even with severe environmental degradation, life here is finding a way to come back.

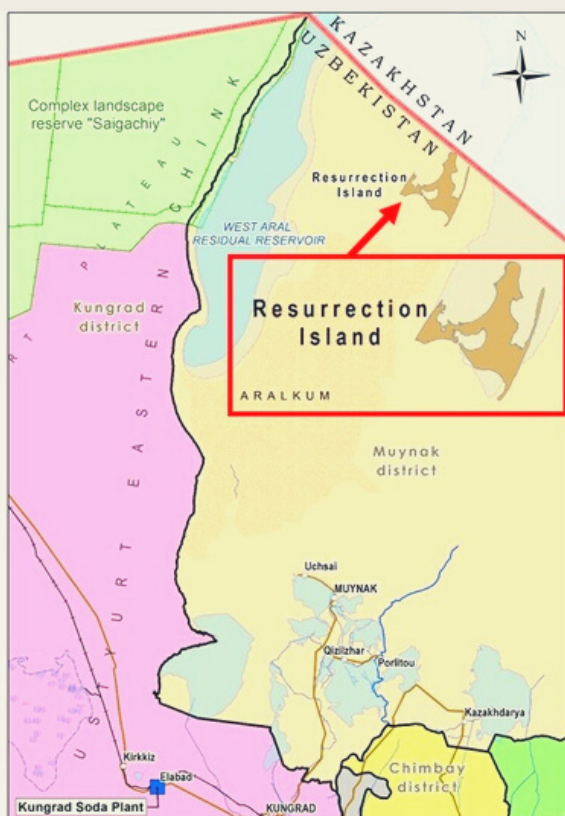
Known as Aralsk-7, Resurrection Island was used as a secret Soviet test site for biological weapons between 1948 and 1992. The village of Kantubek on the island used to house a population of 1,500 workers and their families. The government of Uzbekistan, which owns two-thirds of the island, declared Resurrection Island safe to visit again in 2018. Since then, journalists and others have begun to visit the island.



We will help biodiversity rise from the ashes

Our ambitious 'Resurrection' program will lay the foundation for designating Resurrection island as a recognized protected area, while developing sustainable income streams enabling residents to benefit, ensuring that industrial development results in 'No Net Loss' of biodiversity.

Scientists recently gained access to the island after the recent drying of the sea and decommissioning of a Cold War-era abandoned military base. But sadly, poachers and looters could also now access the Island. The conservation and historic value of the island is clear, but so is its vulnerability, and the future development of this bastion of wilderness is being currently discussed. The region is key to growing Uzbekistan's economy, and there is strong interest in exploiting the area for oil, gas, and other industries, as well as for tourists to visit the dry seabed and former fishing villages. On the other hand, there are also calls for putting the area under protection to preserve its unique fauna and flora.



The Aral Sea in Central Asia is synonymous with ecological and socioeconomic collapse, but carries with it the seeds of its own recovery. At the centre of the region lies what, until the sea largely disappeared, used to be an island: Vozrozhdenie (meaning 'Resurrection'). This remote island has been home to the charismatic and critically endangered saiga antelope for at least 400 years. Until recently, the unique biodiversity of Resurrection Island has been well-preserved due to its inaccessible location and because it was a closed-off military zone for a long time. Nevertheless, the wider area suffers from immense environmental and human health challenges as a result of the Aral Sea crisis and biochemical weapons testing.

"The project actively contributes to and supports the objectives of The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Ecology and Environmental Protection to conserve threatened species and Uzbekistan biodiversity as a whole".

Narzullo Oblomuradov. Chairman, Executive Committee of the Central Council of the Ecological Party of Uzbekistan.



Our 'Resurrection' program will work towards:

- 1. Gaining protected area status for the island.** In doing so, we will build resilience back into the Ustyurt social-ecological system. Through a combination of preparing the groundwork for official protected area status and raising awareness of the value and status of biodiversity on Resurrection Island and the Ustyurt Plateau, the project will safeguard the island's wildlife. We will protect and position saiga antelopes as a flagship species while also preserving the unique fauna and flora of the island.
- 2. Supporting the livelihoods of local people.** Using the ecological and cultural assets of Resurrection Island and the surrounding landscape, we will facilitate new small-scale livelihood opportunities and help address unemployment. Capitalizing on Uzbekistan's prioritisation of tourism, Resurrection Island and its surroundings will become a reliable and widely appreciated source of income and pride, producing a clear link between biodiversity and benefits to people.
- 3. Work towards 'No Net Loss' of biodiversity.** By working closely with industrial development projects modernizing regional infrastructure, we will ensure they are in line with emerging global conservation policies to achieve No Net Loss of biodiversity, or better, in the region.

Together, these activities will encourage social pressure to reduce poaching and looting, and galvanize government agencies to enact better protection for biodiversity. The combined impact will secure and enhance the biodiversity of the Aral Sea region. The island will celebrate a flourishing saiga antelope population that can roam safely and are recognized locally as a flagship species for a newly-resilient ecosystem, while contributing to sustainable economic growth.

"We are convinced [that the programme] will provide great value and opportunities for preserving the nature of the Aral Sea region".

Dr. Bahtiyor Holmatov. Director, Institute of Zoology, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan.



A collaborative approach

Our Resurrection island program will bring government, industry and communities together; turning this area from a symbol of despair into one of hope and regeneration.

"The proposed project will help us significantly in realising the potential for attracting tourists to Karakalpakstan".

Elena Golisheva, Acting Director. Tourism Development Institute, State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Tourism Development.

In 2020, Uzbekistan carried out a National Review of progress towards the Goals for Sustainable Development (SDGs), concluding that it has "a special focus on the Aral Sea region, conservation and the efficient use of water, land and energy resources, as well as biodiversity conservation". Our project directly supports Uzbekistan's own strategic priorities for meeting the SDGs. Additionally, Uzbekistan's 'National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)', emphasised that conserving and restoring biodiversity in the Aral region – a focal region for expanding oil and gas activity - is a national priority for meeting CBD commitments. Our project thus contributes directly towards Uzbekistan's national biodiversity strategy.

Additionally, our program reflects perfectly the aims of a UN General Assembly resolution regards the Aral Sea, which the Ecological party is implementing, and which encourages scientific and research advisory activities in the interests of further restoration and improvement of the environment, conservation of natural resources and improvement of the quality life of the population.

The Karakalpak Council of Ministers acknowledged that the project contributes directly towards Aichi Targets, which will ensure biodiversity values have been integrated into national and local development, and poverty reduction strategies and planning processes, while aiming to ensure the region is conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well connected systems of protected areas.

"The project is exceptionally well aligned with Karakalpak priorities, to the extent that we have formally agreed to make the project activities some of the key components feeding into our Regional Development Strategy".

Jusipbek Kazbekov. Deputy head of the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Ecology & Environmental Protection. Former First Deputy Chair on Environment & Development of the Aral Sea Region Council of Ministers of the Republic of Karakalpakstan.

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