

# Rescued

by Sandra Postel

*Editor's Note: Sandra Postel took time out of her busy schedule directing the Global Water Policy Project in Amherst, Massachusetts to write the following essay for the Committee. Its message resonates with the idea that what has happened at Mono Lake, including the public trust decision, has significance that reaches far beyond Mono's watershed boundaries, and around the world.*

Hope is not an easy emotion to elicit when it comes to the world's water situation. Yet in our time of increasing competition for nature's finite sources of fresh water, Mono Lake looms large in my mind—a symbol of hope.

Globally we now extract three times more water from nature than we did in 1950. In many areas, farms and cities are pumping groundwater faster than nature is replenishing it, depleting aquifers and causing water tables to drop incessantly. Some of the world's major rivers—the Colorado, the Ganges, the Indus, the Nile, and the Yellow, to name a few—are now so heavily diverted that they no longer reach the sea for months at a time.

About 800,000 dams of all sizes now block the earth's freshwater arteries. Many rivers can no longer perform vital ecological functions because we have severed their connections to their floodplains, their deltas, and to the lakes and seas into which they empty. We have built hundreds of billions of dollars of hydraulic infrastructure—dams, diversions, dikes, and levees—that is literally killing the aquatic world. Worldwide one out of three fish species is to some degree at risk of extinction. Here in the United States, the Nature Conservancy warns that 38 percent of freshwater fish are at risk, along with 51 percent of crayfish and 69 percent of freshwater mussels.



Photo by Arya Degenhardt

For me, these statistics really hit home when, in 1995, I traveled to the poster child of aquatic ruins—the fabled Aral Sea. Once the world's fourth largest lake, the Aral Sea in Central Asia has steadily been shrinking since Soviet engineers began siphoning its tributaries off to irrigate cotton in the desert. Over the last forty years, the Aral's volume has dropped by two-thirds, its surface area has shrunk by half, and its salinity has tripled. Outside the old port town of Muynak, I stood on what had once been a lakeside bluff but I saw no water—the sea was 25 miles away. A graveyard of ships lay before me, rotting and rusting in the dried-up seabed. Salt dusted the landscape like new-fallen snow. And toxic dust storms emanating from the exposed lake bottom made the air hazardous to breath and poisoned the land.

The economic and social landscape mirrored the physical one. Sixty thousand fishing jobs had been wiped out, and thousands of people had left the area. The people who remained in the “disaster zone” suffered from startlingly high rates

of anemia, respiratory ailments, and a variety of cancers. Infant mortality was high. Never before had I grasped so viscerally the connections between the health of an ecosystem and that of the economy, community, and people who depend on that ecosystem.

During my visit, a number of colleagues and I met in the city of Nukus with representatives of local agencies and groups working daily to combat this tragedy. It was a sobering experience I shall never forget. I was keenly aware that anything close to a total repair of the Aral Sea's destruction was impossible. What international agencies were likely to offer was paltry compared with the region's needs. As my turn to speak approached, I felt a strange mix of sadness and panic. I looked around the room at the dozens of people who had so passionately expressed their concerns, their needs, their desperation. What could I possibly say that would make a difference?

Then, as if by divine intervention, Mono Lake came to my mind. I realized that what I could do was to offer a story of hope. I had visited Mono Lake only once, in 1982. At that time, after four decades of Los Angeles's diversions of its tributaries, the lake was near its lowest recorded level. Its haunting beauty, and its extreme vulnerability, had made a deep impression on me. Over the years I carried its image, and I followed its story. It was just a year before I traveled to the Aral Sea region that the California State Water Resources Control Board had ordered Los Angeles to moderate its diversions from Mono Lake's tributaries so that the lake would rise to a surface elevation of 6,392 feet. Los Angeles would have to turn to conservation and other methods to meet its needs. Combined with earlier court decisions, it was a stunning environmental victory.

And so there in the Aral Sea basin, I

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