Swedish Aral Sea Society – Position paper

The background of SASS

The Aral Sea Region is defined as limited by the physical boundaries of the Aral Sea Basin (cf. Figure 1). It thereby has an inherent focus on water resources and water resources management. Physically, the region includes land and water areas in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan and has a specific focus on the Aral Sea and the two main rivers in the basin – the Amu Darya and Sur Darya.

The Swedish Aral Sea Society (SASS – Svenska Aralsjösällskapet in Swedish) was formed from an informal network of persons, interested in understanding and combating the ecologic degradation in the Aral Sea region. SASS was established as a result of an international conference conducted in 1998 by the UN Development Fund for Women (UN Women Sweden, formerly Swedish Unifem) in collaboration with Save the Children and the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. The focus in the conference was on the disastrous social consequences of the drying up of the Aral Sea, with degrading economy, and health, while focus on water management and the reasons for the drying up of the Aral Sea came later.

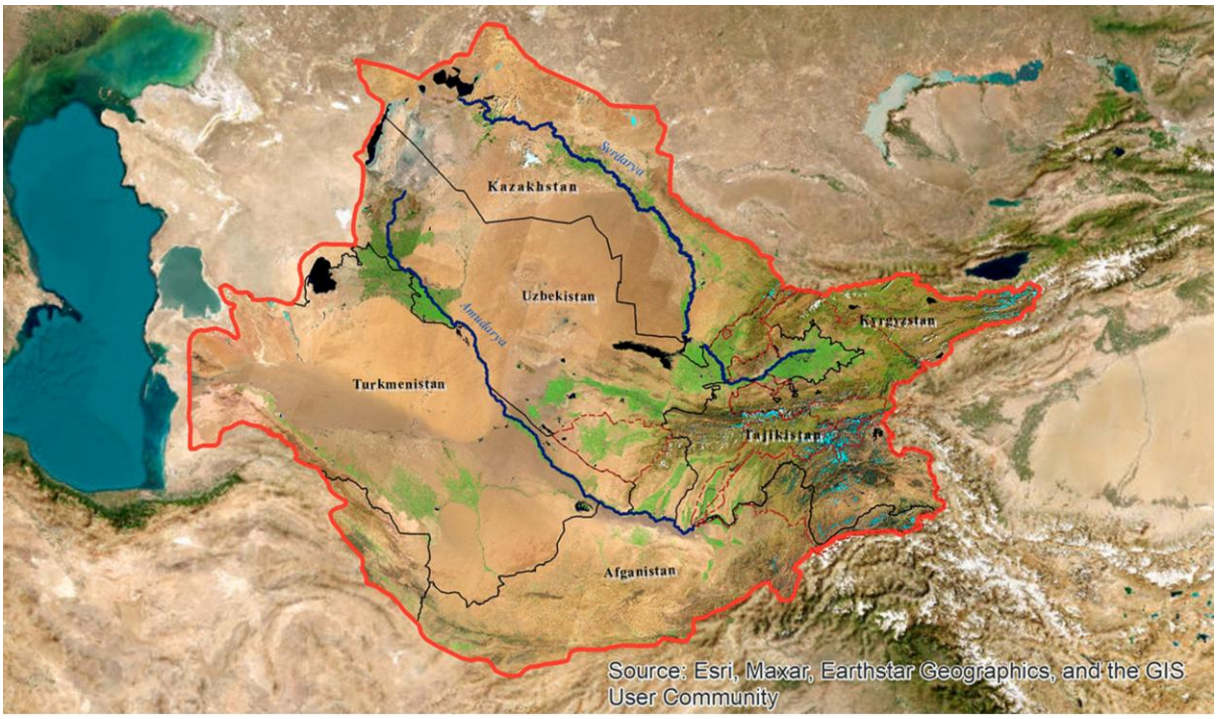


Figure 1: The Aral Sea Basin. Map copied from CAWater homepage (https://www.cawater-info.net/aral/maps_e.htm).

Among the activities that the Swedish Aral Sea Society has arranged, often in collaboration with other important organizations, can be mentioned:

- Swedish students participated in a children's conference "Children, Citizenship and Environment" in Karakalpakstan (1999);
- A number of international seminars during the annual World Water Week in Stockholm (1999 and following years);

- A paper on the Aral Sea situation was presented at the conference "Prospects of Democracy in Central Asia" (Istanbul 2003);
- A cultural exchange with the Karakalpakstan region in Uzbekistan through a visit to Sweden by the head of the art museum in Nukus (2003);
- A seminar was organised on the theme "Children at Risk" with participation from the region (2005);
- A seminar was organised on democracy issues with the former British ambassador to Uzbekistan (2005);
- A seminar was organised on oil and gas in Central Asia (2006);
- A conference together with the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences (KVA) with international participation under the title "Who speaks up for the Aral Sea? Central Asia in Crisis" was organised (2006);
- SASS participated in the EU project UZWATER, where scientists from 5 European universities cooperated with 8 Uzbek universities in establishing university education in water resources management and sustainable development (2012-2015);
- SASS granted a scholarship to the memory of the Swedish researcher Björn Guterstam to an Uzbek student from Karapalkakstan which allowed the student a 3 month visit to Uppsala University, Sweden (2018-2019);
- Starting in the year 2021, SASS is organizing a distant mode M.Sc. level course with the title Sustainable Development and Sustainability Science (SDSS) each spring between February and May. During spring 2026 the course gathered 11 universities from Central Asia, of which 10 from Uzbekistan and one from Kyrgyzstan.
- During summer 2026, SASS in cooperation with the Samarkand Institute of Economics and Services, Karakalpak State University, the Silk Road International Institute and the project EUSUSTAIN organized a Summer School in Samarkand 3-9 September. One part of the course was an interaction with an OSCE Hackathon event on Water Resources Management 7-8 September in Samarkand.

SASS in 2026 – issues of global understanding and solidarity

SASS, as several Swedish NGOs working at the international arena, has had several reasons to question its engagement far away from Sweden. Why would Swedes and Sweden engage in the Aral Sea region and its problems instead of working in the Swedish backyard?

In the present global situation, with an ever-increasing use of physical resources (materials and energy), the global ecosystems are threatened and the global physical resource metabolism would need to decrease. Travel, especially by air has an intense resource use and a substantial climate impact. SASS could easily justify to engage in more local challenges than those far away.

At the same time, many small NGOs in Sweden are facing difficulties in recruiting volunteers for their work – modern life is very demanding, especially for middle-aged couples with two formal jobs and children. This has resulted in a situation where SASS at the moment only has a small core of rather senior members, several of them already formally retired. Thus, a strong need has been to find arguments for a continued involvement in the Aral Sea situation and for efforts to recruit new younger members.

After discussions in the SASS board, it was judged necessary to draft a simple position paper on the future of the organisation and on arguments to increase its efforts in Sweden and in the Aral Sea Region. This paper is an attempt to formulate such a position paper.

The Aral Sea as a symbol of resource mismanagement

The Aral Sea situation has been known all over the world as a catastrophic area of water mismanagement, illustrated by rusting ships on the former seabed of the Aral Sea in the city of Moynaq. They have taken on the role of symbolising the social consequences of natural resource mismanagement, in this case water, similar to e.g. the giant statues of Easter Island where the deforestation of the island led to a collapse of the society. The Easter Island can hardly be saved, but for the Aral Sea the understanding of how the mismanagement occurred and how it, at least in part, could be reversed is well grounded in science. The Aral Sea could be a case showing the ability of mankind to reverse development and by good resource management improve the situation of the society and develop a healthy interaction between society and the ecosystem.

Mismanagement of natural resources is not unique for the Aral Sea region, nor for water. It is sadly a too often occurring situation all over the world and for many different natural resources. Overuse of water has caused the Colorado River, one of the largest rivers in the world, to shrink disastrously. Overuse of forest resources and following deforestation has serious consequences for biological diversity and societies in Southeast Asia and South America. The large-scale use of fossil fuels for energy causing climate change proves that the environmental consequences of over use of a resource is hitting us and the planet long before the resource has been used up.

SASS position vs the Aral Sea Region challenges

The statements below, based on available data regarding the situation in the Aral Sea region, and adopted by the SASS board constitute a position in further discussions with other stakeholders in and outside the Aral Sea Region. SASS will base its arguments in different matters based on these statements. If new information will be available, the SASS position will have to change.

Position statements

- The Aral Sea Region water management should be regarded as a disaster of a global dimension. It has deprived millions of inhabitants of the region income, health and their home in a broad sense. It has a symbolic and global dimension as perhaps the single most visible currently on-going environmental disaster demonstrating the impact of humans on ecosystems, while we have to realize that similar processes are on-going in many other areas of the world.
- The ecologic systems response which led to this specific ecological disaster was not understood. Main contributing factors, *inter alia* its geographical location far from seas, very little local rainfall, heavy dependence of water from far away mountain ranges, the fact that it is essentially a closed regional water system, was not adequately recognised when the water use in the region was planned.
- The current water situation and ecological state in the Aral Sea Region is an extremely complex result of human activity and ecosystem response, the details of which are still partly unknown. It is therefore important – besides direct actions

– to study, compile and spread knowledge of what is on-going in the region. This is an excellent basis for further international cooperation.
- The Aral Sea Region is shared by six countries that all have a strong stake in the restoration of the ecological state of the region – a strengthened regional cooperation and functional agreements on the future division and use of water resources will have to be established.
- A key aspect of ecological restoration efforts in the Aral Sea Region will be to study, develop and implement new types of water-efficient socioeconomic activities that can improve the economic returns in comparison to water use, and be a model for improving water management in other dry regions in the world.
- The lessons that can be learned from the Aral Sea Region should be documented and spread to other parts of the world and motivate other countries to get involved in the work to restore the ecological state and help to avoid similar events in other parts of the world. This is a main argument for SASS's further involvement in the Aral Sea Region challenges.

Key directions of work

For SASS, it is important to focus on such issues where it would make a difference in spite of the geographic distance to the region and very limited sources of funding.

It is suggested that the following directions of work will be the focus for 2026-2030:

- Collection and distribution of information from the region to the Swedish, but also the international community where feasible.
- Increasing the academic cooperation on sustainable development and water management that was initiated in 2021 between Swedish institutions and universities and universities, institutions and communities in the Aral Sea region.
- Taking into account the starting point for SASS in 1998, there will be a specific focus on the role of women in Central Asia, in particular with regard to the water/gender issue.

SASS – suggestions to concrete joint activities

A first version of the position paper from 2020 has been revised with the inclusion of the following concrete suggestions to activities that SASS is interested in promoting and to participate in:

- Further develop the course Sustainable Development and Sustainability Science between Sweden and universities in Central Asia by means of distant mode techniques and involve more universities from Sweden and Central Asia;
- Initiate activities to discuss and plan joint efforts to increase other types of academic cooperation between Sweden and Central Asia, e.g. a summer school in Central Asia. A first summer school event was implemented in September 2026;
- Support activities oriented towards the organisation of student exchange between Sweden and Central Asia;
- Foster an integration of Swedish academic cooperation activities with other EU countries;
- Identification and systematization of relevant academic and other material on the Aral Sea Basin water situation and its development;

- Initiate new concrete projects within the area of the food/water/energy nexus and with a long-term aim to find water and energy saving means of providing goods and social services.
- Support funding activities in the six Aral Sea Basin countries, Sweden and EU to finance mutual study visits and concrete development projects;

We are interested to further develop and revise these thoughts in collaboration with our colleagues and friends in Central Asia.

Swedish Aral Sea Society 2026-11-05/coordinated by Björn Frostell