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Between the flux:

Life on the shores of Lake Sevan

by Jamie Maddison

There was a moment in March this year when bureaucrats in the Armenian capital Yerevan gave a little cheer for Lake Sevan. Boosted by spring runoff from the mountains surrounding Lake Sevan, the water level in the lake had risen to above the 1900-metre contour, bringing the lake level back up to that which prevailed fifty years ago. Jamie Maddison, accompanied by translator Lilit Markosian, set off from Yerevan to explore the shifting shorelines of Armenia's largest lake.

Tucked into a mountain basin sixty kilometres north-east of Yerevan is Lake Sevan (*Sevana lich* in Armenian). It is an Old World version of Titicaca and Tahoe: a huge montane lake, as beautiful as its counterparts in the Americas. For those who venture out from Yerevan, Lake Sevan is a rewarding sight, most particularly in winter when fewer people are on the move.

Yet for the people who live around the shores of Lake Sevan, life is a far cry from the Arcadian

RIGHT: Map showing the territory of Armenia, its borders and the regional hydrography. The disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh is not here identified as a separate entity (map scale 1:3.75m).

Country abbreviations: AZ=Azerbaijan; GE=Georgia; IR=Iran; TR=Turkey

scenes shown on the picture postcards sold in the kiosks and cafés along the lakeside roads. In fact, winter living conditions have become so harsh that many people are now leaving, heading for Russia. Many never return.

The old social order of the Soviet world has fragmented, and many of the older folk living around Lake Sevan do not recognise the new world they now inhabit.

Armenia secured its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and the ensuring years have not been easy. Nowhere is that more true than on the shores of Lake Sevan. The local economy has nose-dived, the clear social order of the Soviet world has fragmented, and many of the older folk living around Lake Sevan do not recognise the new world they now inhabit. The water level, drastically lowered during a Stalinist-era water-abstraction plan, is creeping back once again, flooding illegally-built and now-abandoned buildings at the water's edge.

Fish stocks have plummeted and entire fishing communities have been left redundant. Lastly, creeping colonisation of the shores by cafés, restaurants and hotels is marring a landscape which once enjoyed stringent protection as one of the first national parks in the Soviet Union.

Today, it is one of just two national parks in the Republic of Armenia.

RISING WATERS

Against this backdrop of uneasy change, there is little that stands for permanence. The churches at Sevanavank are a marked exception, and this erstwhile monastic complex is the natural first stop for anyone setting off to explore the Lake Sevan region. At first sight this seems like a sacred landscape untouched by time, but one-time fisherman Gevork Baghdasaryan tells another tale. He points out the trees, modest houses and garish cafés that cluster on the isthmus that leads to the former island with its two distinctive churches.

OPPOSITE: Rising waters at Lake Sevan; RIGHT: one of the churches at Sevanavank on the shores of Lake Sevan (both pictures by Jamie Maddison).

Water politics

The story of Lake Sevan reveals the tensions between economic development and environmental security. The fluvial lands of western Armenia have fertile soils but suffer from aridity. It was a grand plan of the early Soviet Union to take water from Lake Sevan and divert it to support the developing agricultural collectives closer to Yerevan. Lake Sevan's high altitude was the key. Gravity would do the work, and along the way there was potential for generating hydroelectric power.

Although the Sevan water-abstraction project did not have the catastrophic consequences that ensued with the Soviet Union's Aral Sea scheme, the Sevan experiment has left a legacy of environmental degradation that still haunts Armenia today.

Ecologists welcome the newly rising lake levels, but the Yerevan elite who have holiday homes on the shoreline take a less positive view of the development. And, beset by petitions from farmers in the Ararat Valley who desperately need water for their crops, the Armenian Parliament this summer voted to sanction a limited amount of renewed water abstraction from Lake Sevan.

"According to my grandfather that whole area was once under water. The churches were on an island in the lake," explains Gevork with a grand gesture towards the churches that rate as the premier tourist attraction in the Lake Sevan region. "And now the water level is rising again. It's up three metres in the past three years."

Gevork Baghdasaryan's vocation as a fisherman may be a thing of the past, but he is one of the lucky few who have carved out a new career. Today, he works as a lake monitoring officer with a local hydrometrological laboratory. Since 1927, the lab has tracked the fluctuating water levels of Lake Sevan. Gevork and his predecessors have witnessed extraordinary changes over the last 75 years.

Emma Hovanisyan at her stall at Sevanavank (photo by Jamie Maddison).

From 1933, the level of Lake Sevan progressively fell, and the newly exposed foreshores were planted with meadows filled with nut and oak trees. By 1962, the lake level had dropped by a remarkable twenty metres, with the surface area of the water body cut by some two hundred square kilometres.

The wisdom of the project came under question during Khrushchev's rule and the lake was finally stabilized in 1962, having narrowly avoided the same disastrous fate that has since befallen the Aral Sea. Now water is slowly refilling Lake Sevan, as Gevork explains: "We're expecting it to rise by six metres in total, so we have about three or four metres left to go."

But whilst the lake has over recent years been growing in size once again, the teams monitoring it are actually on the decrease. "There used to be twelve staff at our centre, now there's only five," Gevork explains. "In the time of the Soviet Union we would take tours around the lake every day and check the clarity of the water but we only do this once a month now. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the workplace also collapsed with it. Armenia is not a well-functioning country now."

Emma Hovanisyan was born in Sevan, brought up in Sevan, and is growing old in Sevan. This 62-year-old trinket seller makes a living from

the tourists visiting the churches at Sevanavank. She has seen at first hand the region's struggle to preserve employment and trade: "Of course I have seen change, especially with the people. There's hardly any work and I do not receive a pension."

"There's almost no trade here in winter," she elaborates. "People do not come for days on end; there are no tourists. Even in summer it is still hard to get a job here because café owners only hire friends and family members."

Around the lakeshore lies the village of Tsamakaberd. With not a single soul in sight it takes several minutes exploring before Lilit (my translator) and I encounter someone with whom to speak. Eventually we find signs of life but are mistaken for Jehovah's Witnesses and then ignored. But Varida Petrosyan comes to our rescue, enthusiastically inviting us into her home. She lives with her daughter-in-law and her three young grandchildren, who play robustly by the warmth of the lounge's wood-burning stove.

Once a prosperous community, the village of Noratus is now a forlorn witness to the complete collapse of Lake Sevan's fishing industry over recent years.

Married in 1966, Varida's husband and all his brothers were fishermen. Indeed her father-in-law was a captain of a fishing vessel for 35 years; he even kept his boat through the Second World War when many others were commandeered. She explains that at that time fish were plentiful: "He caught primarily trout and would give it away to the poor people of Sevan, and he had eleven children to feed himself."

Yet today the endemic Sevan trout (*Salmo ischchan*) is on the verge of extinction in its natural waters due to changes in the water quality, the introduction of competitors and a poorly enforced ban on catching the fish. Indeed, even the once prolific catches of common whitefish (*Coregonus lavaretus*), first introduced into Sevan in the 1920s, have declined massively over the last ten years.

The lakeshore village of Noratus (photo by Jamie Maddison).

Such dwindling stocks have primarily come from overfishing, despite detailed quotas on how much can be caught and a complete ban on catching whitefish during their spawning season from late November to mid-December.

"Even during the Karabakh War around the time of independence, nobody left because we had good and plentiful fish," Varida states. "Now there is no fish and so there is no work. No surprise then a lot of people are packing their bags and heading north to Russia."

A matter of survival

About halfway down the lake's western shore is the village of Noratus. Once a prosperous community, Noratus is now a forlorn witness to the complete collapse of Lake Sevan's fishing industry over recent years. In the summer, tourists flock here in numbers to see the famous field of *khachkars*, the intricately carved memorial stelae that mark the graves. Yet in the snowy winters few visitors come to the stones and even fewer linger long. The opportunities for maintaining any credible business around tourism are minimal.

In Noratus, we meet a fisherman. He displays his catch of nine yellowed and sorry-looking fish. "Your name?" asks Lilit politely. "Me, I'm Spartak Hakobyan," he laughs. It is clearly a fake name, the Armenian equivalent of Spartacus Smith.

The name may not be convincing, but the man gives an all-too-real account of the death of the area's fishing: "Everything has gone down. There used to be plenty of fish and plenty of fishermen by those trees," pointing towards the foreshore. "And over there, there was a fish market."

Armenians from other parts of the country rarely bother to come this far, largely viewing the area as a neglected backwater.

I gently raise the question of overfishing. "Of course it isn't feasible to stop working during the spawning season," he replies sharply. "We are barely surviving here. Lots of people are leaving to go to places like Germany and Russia."

The man takes Lilet aside and talks quietly to her in Armenian. It turns out he is counselling caution as I am undoubtedly "working for the Americans."

The troubled fisherman analyses the grim options facing those living by the lake, concluding that even if ever the fish were to return, big businesses will surely follow in their wake, milking every opportunity and leaving nothing for the locals.

As we continue south, it is apparent just how much moneymaking ventures have penetrated into the heart of the once sacrosanct grounds around Lake Sevan's shore: half-completed hotels loom behind smaller holiday-dwellings and cafés right on the water's edge. Further along is what happens next. Sunk and half-concealed in the ice is the shell of an empty building, abandoned to the rising waters.

A LAKE WITH NO FISH

"I was born here, raised here and my family is from here," says Hovanes Bostanchyan proudly, as we all squeeze inside his little news kiosk in Gavar, the largest town on the west side of the lake. Every summer he sees more tourists arriving in the region. Yet whilst Hovanes appeciates the extra trade, the newspaper vendor is firmly against the growing commercialisation of the Sevan region, which he claims is carving up all the lake's best sections and placing them in private hands.

"I am very much against the manner in which they have divided up the beaches. A lot of the time I try to walk around the lake they stop me and make me pay 1500 dram." That is about three euros, a pretty price to pay to walk along a lakeshore that you always cherished as public space.

"It makes me feel bad," he adds, "I was a soldier. I fought for my country. And now I have to pay."

Heading south beyond Gavar, the tourism infrastructure and its associated clutter is less evident. Armenians from other parts of the country rarely bother to come this far, largely viewing the area as a neglected backwater.

Martuni, at the south end of the lake, has a sense of being very remote. But for Jeeryre Bariyan, Martuni is a place to make a decent living. He is a fish merchant whose little shack contains the cramped and dirty fish tanks with which he makes his money, selling farmed fish to the hungry citizens of a fishless lake: "Trade is actually better in the winter," he says. "During winter people buy a lot of fish; most of these people work in the summer months in Russia but come

LEFT: Hovanes Bostanchyan in Gavar (photo by Jamie Maddison).

back in winter to see their families. And they have money."

Life may be good for this entrepreneurial merchant, but it is not as pleasant for some of his compatriots, who stand around the shack listlessly watching our exchange. "They do not have work and because the weather is really bad here we can't farm the land well," continues Jeeryre, "That is why a lot of people are leaving. The only thing we can do is open up factories, and I'm not worried about the environmental problems."

Indeed, the Armenians of Lake Sevan appear to be caught in a cleft stick: expanding tourism has brought with it employment and some infrastructure but the jobs are there only for the summer and the new buildings are at odds with the protected status of this sensitive landscape. On the other hand, efforts to increase the water quality and volume of the lake might just succeed. But without an equivalent growth in non-seasonal industry, lakeside communities will always be hard-pressed not to exploit the remerging fish-stocks that would hopefully accompany any such regeneration.

Yet for some these are but temporary issues: the teething troubles of a new country that has yet to come to terms with a nexus of economic and environmental challenges. Outside his fish shop, even when surrounded by jaded and jobless locals, Jeeryre is surprisingly optimistic about the future of Lake Sevan's people: "In my grandchildren's time all will be good. Armenia is now an independent country so things will slowly get better." ■

Half-completed commercial development on the shores of Lake Sevan (photo by Jamie Maddison).

Jamie Maddison is an English writer and photographer. He is currently horse-riding across Central Asia in preparation to mark the centenary of a similar journey by the Anglo-Irish explorer Sir Charles Howard-Bury. Find out more about Jamie's work at www.jamiemaddison.com.

Around the lake

A day trip from the Armenian capital Yerevan to Lake Sevan is perfectly feasible. Regular buses serve the Sevan Highway, giving a direct link from Yerevan to the lakeside churches at Sevanavank and, less frequently, to Gavar (on the west shore of the lake). During the summer season, there is a daily direct train linking Yerevan with Sevan.

To really explore the region, a car is essential (ideally with a driver used to Armenian roads and driving habits). There are motor roads around the entire lake, and the round trip from Sevan via Gavar and Martuni to Vardenis, returning to Sevan along the east shore of the lake, runs to 212 kilometres. Note that the quality of the roads deteriorates beyond Martuni, so the full circuit of the lake by car is an option best reserved for better summer weather.

The east side of Lake Sevan, being so much more remote from Yerevan, has not attracted so many tourists, but that does not mean it is free of development. Armenia's most significant mineral resource, the gold reserves at Sotk, is near the south-east corner of the lake. A mineral railway runs along the east shore of the lake to serve the open-cast pits where the gold is mined. Unsurprisingly, the mining activities spawn many heated debates about the challenges of reconciling economic development with environmental amenity.