A Sea Divided

Trace how decisions changed the Aral Sea and nearby communities.

WG.P.2.3.C "Evaluate the extent to which political and economic decisions have had significant impact on human and physical environments of various places and regions."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two political or economic decisions, circle two changes to the physical environment, and box two effects on people's work. Use your marks to judge how widely each decision mattered.

The Aral Sea: Gains and Costs

1 In the 1960s, Soviet leaders set out to grow more cotton in Central Asia. They ordered large canals to carry water from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers to irrigated fields in what are now Uzbekistan and neighboring countries. Cotton brought jobs and supplied factories, so expanding farms seemed profitable. But the two rivers also fed the Aral Sea, a lake between present-day Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. As farms took more river water, less reached the lake. This was not simply a dry spell: a government decision to redirect water, tied to an economic goal, changed the region's water supply.

2 By the late 1980s, the Aral Sea had shrunk dramatically, and its salinity had risen. Many fish could no longer survive, damaging fishing businesses and the communities that depended on them. The exposed lakebed became a source of dust mixed with salt and farm chemicals. Wind carried that dust across nearby land, adding to health concerns and harming crops. The irrigation system still supported cotton production and farm incomes, so the effects were not all losses. Yet those gains were uneven: people working in fishing towns faced costs that cotton growers did not. The shrinking lake shows how an economic benefit can carry large environmental costs.

3 After the Soviet Union dissolved, governments faced different choices about the damaged sea. In Kazakhstan, a dam completed in 2005 helped keep water in the northern part of the Aral Sea. Water levels there rose, salinity fell, and some fish populations and fishing jobs returned. The southern part, mostly in Uzbekistan, did not receive the same benefit and remained severely depleted as irrigation continued to use river water. The dam did not restore the whole lake or erase the earlier damage. Still, it shows that a later political decision could partly reverse environmental harm and help some communities, while leaving others with severe problems.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How significant was the decision to expand cotton irrigation? Judge its impact using one effect on the Aral Sea and one effect on people's work.

2. Did cotton growers and fishing communities experience the irrigation decision in the same way? Judge the difference using evidence from the passage.

3. To what extent did the 2005 dam reverse earlier damage? Support your judgment with one physical change and one effect on people.

4. Which decision had the broader impact across the Aral Sea region, expanding irrigation or building the dam? Explain using evidence about both the northern and southern areas.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

An island government can allow hotels to replace coastal wetlands, creating jobs, or limit construction to protect wetlands that absorb floodwater. In four sentences, recommend a policy, predict an effect on people and an effect on the physical environment, explain a trade-off, and connect your reasoning to a decision in the passage.

A Sea Divided

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two political or economic decisions, circle two changes to the physical environment, and box two effects on people's work. Use your marks to judge how widely each decision mattered. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How significant was the decision to expand cotton irrigation? Judge its impact using one effect on the Aral Sea and one effect on people's work.	**It had a major impact: less river water reached the sea, which shrank and became saltier. Cotton farming supported jobs, but the damaged sea harmed fishing businesses.**
2	Did cotton growers and fishing communities experience the irrigation decision in the same way? Judge the difference using evidence from the passage.	**No. Irrigation supported cotton production and farm incomes, while the shrinking, saltier sea damaged fishing businesses and the communities that relied on them.**
3	To what extent did the 2005 dam reverse earlier damage? Support your judgment with one physical change and one effect on people.	**It partly reversed the damage in the north: water levels rose and salinity fell, while some fishing jobs returned. It did not restore the whole sea.**
4	Which decision had the broader impact across the Aral Sea region, expanding irrigation or building the dam? Explain using evidence about both the northern and southern areas.	**Expanding irrigation had the broader impact because it reduced water reaching the sea and damaged fishing communities. The dam helped the north, but the south remained severely depleted.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would limit hotel construction to protect the wetlands, even though the island might gain fewer hotel jobs. Keeping wetlands would leave more land to absorb floodwater, which could reduce damage to homes. People seeking hotel work would bear a cost, while residents in flood-prone areas could benefit. As with the Aral Sea river diversions, a decision that creates jobs can also shift environmental costs onto other people.

Accept other supported judgments of significance, including a different choice in Question 4, if students distinguish regional effects from the dam's more limited benefits. For Your Turn, accept either policy when the response explains both kinds of effects and a plausible trade-off.