



Press Release

2000km of history – battles over Central Asia's longest river

VW Foundation backs international project into the deeper cultural and social significance of the Naryn – Syr Darya River

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The Volkswagen Foundation is sponsoring a Tübingen-led international research project on water resources in central Asia. The project, entitled “The Social Life of a River: Environmental histories, social worlds and conflict resolution along the Naryn-Syr Darya,” brings together cultural anthropologists, political scientists and historians from Germany, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to investigate the social and environmental history of the Syr Darya river. The Volkswagen Foundation is contributing €450,000. The project began last September and will run until September 2018.

At 2200 km, the Syr Darya is Central Asia's longest river. It flows through Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and feeds the disappearing Aral Sea. The river provides water to millions of people, generates power and supplies agriculture. This makes it a source of conflict. Since the end of the Soviet Union, disagreements have been arising over the use and distribution of water from the Syr Darya.

The five researchers aim to explore people's attitudes toward the river and the influence of these attitudes on coexistence in the region. Ultimately, the goal is to find new perspectives for regional water management. The researchers will draw on a wide range of information, including archives, interviews, and observations on location. They will document how the river is perceived and used by different parties, as well as how it influences social and political conditions along its banks.

Dr. Jeanne Féaux de la Croix of Tübingen University's Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies is conducting an ethnological study into the effects of new dams along the upper reaches of the Syr Darya, where it is called the Naryn river.

Dr. Mokhira Suyarkulova of the international University of Central Asia is investigating how knowledge about the river is generated by water scientists at universities, in government agencies and international organizations - and how that discourse influences the way the Syr Darya is used in the Tajik region of Khojand.

Dr. Adham Ashirov of Uzbekistan's Historical Institute at the Academy of Sciences in Tashkent looks at the relationship the rural population in the country's Ferghana Valley has with the river, incorporating both practical exploitation of the river as well as art and folklore surrounding it.

Doctoral student Gulzat Baialieva of the Bishkek Humanities University in Kyrgyzstan will examine how local residents experienced the Soviet-era construction of hydroelectric power stations and industrial towns; and the collapse of industry dependent on hydroelectricity, as well as the role played by the river now in economic and everyday life.

Another Kyrgyz PhD student, Aibek Samakov, is researching the river's Kazakh delta to find out how people there deal with a water source which constantly alternates between flooding and drying out – not least because of agricultural and hydropower decisions upriver.

The overall aim is to conduct a comprehensive socio-economic study on the role of the Naryn/ Syr Darya river in central Asia. "We hope to open up new perspectives on this deeply historical river," says Féaux de la Croix. "We aim to open up a one-sided, purely economic view of it as a water source, moving to an understanding of the river as a key place of interaction, which has helped to shape life in the region." It is often reported that Central Asia does not have enough water, but the real problem is not a lack of water but an uneven distribution of it. "A new focus will open up possibilities, new ways of developing water management in the region."

Féaux de la Croix, a cultural anthropologist, is a co-founder of the Central Eurasian Scholars and Media Initiative (CESMI). The organization aims to make well-researched information about central Asia available to the media and the public - both in English and in central Asian languages.

(<http://cesmi.info/wp/>)<http://cesmi.info/wp/>

The social scientists involved in the current project are seeking dialogue with water management and scientific experts in Central Asia. In collaboration with partners such as the University of Central Asia in Bishkek and the Uzbek Academy of Sciences, they aim to strengthen research and teaching on political ecology, environmental anthropology and environmental history in the region. This will include international conferences, a multimedia website, a database (the Syr Darya Knowledge Hub), and a travelling exhibition at points along the river.

Project website: <http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/de/64592><http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/de/64592>

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Ice fishing on the Syr Darya in Kazakhstan. Local residents have close ties with their region's longest river.

Photo: William Wheeler



A popular photo motif in Kyrgyzstan - the Kurp Sai dam

Photo: Jeanne Féaux de la Croix