

AZOH: About 100 years ago, my grandfather emigrated to the United States from a village near Lake Urmia, in what is now northwestern Iran. He died long before I was born, leaving me with little connection to my ancestors in the region, but a strong desire to someday visit the place -- tantalizing close to Turkey, where I now live, though difficult to reach due to visa restrictions -- where they apparently once tended vineyards. If I don't manage to get there soon, though, there may not be much left to see of the lake itself. Though the nearby city of Urmia's name means "city of water," irrigation projects and extended drought have shrunk Lake Urmia (Orumiyeh) to half its former size, according to a recent Financial Times report that I first heard about on the Middle East environmental blog Green Prophet.

Now Saltier Than The Dead Sea

The number of flamingos and other migratory waterfowl in the area has dropped by at least 70 percent as the increasing salinity of the lake, the largest in the Middle East and an important saltwater wetland, has decimated their aquatic food sources. The lake is now believed to be saltier than the Dead Sea, and, the Financial Times writes, "Many Iranians fear Lake Orumiyeh could go the way of Central Asia's Aral Sea, which has virtually disappeared after Soviet-era irrigation projects deprived it of water," sending salt storms across the country and into Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey. Up to 13 million people in this important grape-growing region could be displaced if the lake, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, dries up.

The Iranian government has allocated \$1.7 billion over the next five years to redistribute water resources in the region and redesign irrigation systems, a plan it hopes will save Lake Urmia and the people and wildlife that depend on it -- before it's too late.

<http://www.treehugger.com/natural-sciences/irans-lake-urmia-is-drying-up-fast.html>

