



Inspiring Initiative: Media Tour Uzbekistan -
Raising Environmental Awareness

Land: Uzbekistan

Land degradation: Salinisation, water degradation
(quantity), vegetation degradation

Initiative by: Tashkent Environment Information
Centre / **Initiative supported by:** CAREC



NGO's and Journalists Making Land Degradation Public



A media tour to Verkhnechirchiksky hydro station in March of 2003 had been organized in partnership with the Basin Water Organization "Syrdarya", which is responsible for this waterworks facility. After the journalists inspected the waterworks facility, which controls the supply of water into a channel, there was a discussion of the topic "How to manage water resources?". Experts were talking about automation of the water management industry in Uzbekistan and Central Asia, introduction of the integrated water resources

management system in Ferghana Valley, desertification in the Aral Sea area. Then the bus headed for Charvak water reservoir. Journalists were getting information on the way there, too. The "open microphone" provided the opportunity for most of the participants to express their opinions regarding the subject of the media tour and the "round table", as well as to touch upon other urgent issues related to the environment of Uzbekistan.

SETTING THE INITIATIVE

Uzbekistan is a landlocked country in the Asian steppes. The country is experiencing considerable land degradation and desertification. Water resources are declining and subject to increased pressure and competition, while waste disposal and loss of biodiversity pose other environmental challenges.

Despite a large media presence in the country, environmental issues receive little national publicity. The main sources of information, an environmental bulletin and a government newsletter, are very little read outside government circles. Against this background a group of journalists and environmentalists came together in 2002 to form the Tashkent Environment Information Centre. Its aim is to build links between the media and environmental professionals from NGOs and the government, in order to raise public and political awareness about environmental problems. The idea is to give professional environmentalists more access to media channels and to provide journalists with the information to communicate about the often complex intertwining of natural and social forces that shape contemporary environmental problems.

Since its founding, the Centre has produced a number of environmental almanacs that provide reference material for journalists and broadcasters. It has also organised fifteen round tables for environmental professionals and the media and arranged five tours to key environmental sites, including a hydro-power station, research institutes and national parks. Between thirty and forty journalists or broadcasters participated in each of these tours. More recently, the Centre has established a website as a source for breaking environmental stories and background material. In 2008 the Centre won a state-run competition for supporting NGOs, which has enabled it to consolidate its work and shows official support for its groundbreaking efforts.

MAKING THE DIFFERENCE

Environmentalists are aware that generating publicity about environmental issues is an essential part of their work, yet they often lack the training in effective communication with a broader lay-audience. Printed press releases may attract passing interest, but they need to be short to capture and hold a journalist's attention. However press releases often do not properly describe the complexity of many environmental issues. Environmental groups and journalists therefore have sought new mechanisms for disseminating information about environmental issues. Initially these started off as roundtables where experts handed out reports to the journalists, informed them about existing problems and answered their questions. This rather formal format was later augmented by media tours, which allowed the media to 'see' the issues at first hand, a particular important aspect for TV broadcasters who look for visual cues to back up the facts. The tours also provide opportunities for more interaction between the two groups. An 'open-microphone' on the tour bus allows participants to discuss the issues in more depth and the tours also provide opportunities for informal networking.

Through giving broadcasters and journalists first-hand exposure to some of the key sites where land degradation issues are being played out, there has been a significant increase in media coverage. The tours and roundtables were followed by TV programmes, radio broadcasts and newspaper articles dedicated to the problems of water apportioning, land degradation, desertification, conserving wildlife and climate change. The tours have enabled journalists to better understand the issues and to communicate them with greater clarity. Environmental organisations are keen to participate in these events as they realise they create publicity and give them more political leverage. Ongoing dialogues have arisen about how to improve two-way information flows, as environmentalists sometimes feel that the issues are not reported with sufficient accuracy or detail.