

Steppe

Threatened steppe

Agricultural exploitation

The agricultural exploitation of these areas has caused a series of inter-linked consequences: the animal and vegetal species of the steppe community are increasingly threatened. Hole diggers, such as moles, damage the crops; larger grazing animals compete with native species, and predators, such as wolves, threaten the survival of cattle. To defend human activities, plans for the extermination of “harmful” species, especially hole diggers, were put forward, but it was soon acknowledged that without the latter the structure of the soil would start deteriorating. In addition, the overexploitation of pastures by farm animals and the habit of leaving the soil without vegetation between one harvesting and the next resulted in the loss of the thin surface layer during storms. This destruction, which slowly leads to desertification, occurred both in the large plains of north-America and in the steppes of central Asia.

Pollution

Kazakhstan has been dramatically damaged. In the Sixties, corn was intensively grown in the country, but this plan caused many ecological disasters. The course of the rivers Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya, tributaries to Lake Aral, was diverted to irrigate the fields and as a consequence the lake waters dropped down. The port of Aralsk moved away from the lake and the village emptied. Fish died because water became much saltier, rains decreased, sand, salt and dust rose into storms of hundreds of kilometres. Birds and animals left the delta of the river. In the meantime, the chemical residues of farming seeped into the rivers and reached the drinkable waters of Kazakhstan, while the Kazakh steppe died out and got dry and salty because of excess farming. Luckily, since the Sixties environmental awareness has grown all over the world, and now, before a plan is implemented, an “environmental impact assessment” is carried out to assess beforehand all its potential consequences on the different elements of the environment. In addition, the European Community has developed a plan, called “Tacis”, aimed at boosting economical growth in the perspective of the sustainable development of the new independent States resulting from the collapse of the former Soviet Union (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Russian Federation, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan). The plan concerns farming, the environment and nuclear safety, both locally and across borders.

The bison

Even if the American bison, also called buffalo, and the European bison have always been hunted by man, the introduction of thorses and firearms have caused their number to dramatically decrease, seriously endangering the survival of this species. When in Europe the number of heads dropped to six, they began to be protected and their number restarted to grow, putting one herd back together. Today, approximately 2,000 European bison remain, all coming from that original group of six. In America, their natural habitat has been damaged since the seventeenth century by the coming of European people. Buffaloes in particular were hunted by European planters: the legendary Buffalo Bill killed 4,000 in one year. This animal had almost disappeared when reserves and sanctuaries were established to protect the few surviving heads. The operation was successful: 40 thousand heads are now there for everyone to see.