[**Health of the Indus**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1693231/health-of-the-indus)

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THE Indus is dying, and it is dying downstream Sukkur, was the unanimous verdict of filmmaker Wajahat Malik and his five friends after traversing the once mighty river on a raft.

To get first-hand knowledge of the health of the river, the six adventurers started off on March 30 and were given a warm send-off by the locals at Hamzigond in Gilgit-Baltistan’s Kharmang district. They covered an estimated 2,300 kilometres of the entire 3,180 km length of this transboundary river on a raft over 45 days. They reached Kharo Chan in the delta, where the Indus meets the Arabian Sea, turned west and ended their journey at Karachi’s Marina Club.

**Read more**: [*Indus annually delivers 10,000 tonnes of macro-plastics to Arabian Sea, says WB*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1693184/indus-annually-delivers-10000-tonnes-of-macro-plastics-to-arabian-sea-wb)

Theirs was an odd group: three paraglider pilots, one of whom is a karate champion, two white water rafters and one ace swimmer, who could double as a rescuer in case someone fell into the sometimes raging waters — or so they thought. The team had second-hand wet suits (these barely protected them from the frigid glacial waters in the north for more than a minute if anyone fell into the river) helmets, life jackets and a sturdy raft. They could have gone with better gear, but had limited resources.

Though this was not a high-performance, data-intensive computing mission undertaken by environmental field researchers, scientists or anthropologists using state-of-the-art equipment, the six were nevertheless able to see a kaleidoscope of images of the ecological, environmental and socioeconomic devastation of Pakistan’s lifeline wrought by climate transitions, as they slowly moved south.

Whichever town they neared, they would be greeted by floating trash.

They witnessed, and were able to film, the impact of both water shortage, as well as the poor quality of what little was available, on the lives and livelihoods of people living along the river. The reckless dumping of poisonous effluent into the river by factories, hotels and restaurants were some ‘disturbing’ images that were etched on their minds and captured by their cameras.

Whichever town they neared, they would be greeted by islands of floating trash. The flotsam included plastic, bottles and in particular, styrofoam. Little wonder studies say that the Indus contributes 164,332 tonnes of plastic waste (that enters the sea) annually and is the second most plastic-polluted river in the world. The first, third and fourth polluted rivers in this category are in China.

**Read**: [*Alarm sounded as water levels in Indus drop once again*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1690675)

But what was most vividly witnessed was the interaction of local people with natural systems, and the resilience of both against manmade climate-induced disturbances and the realisation how critical this was to understanding the river’s ailments.

Throughout their odyssey, they continued to be educated by water experts like Hassan Abbas, Danish Mustafa and Afia Salam, all of whom joined them at various legs of their journey, enriching their knowledge about how the river was being affected by climate change, the built infrastructure, loss of biodiversity, death of the delta, seawater erosion etc.

Come sunset, and they would disembark on land, and put up somewhere for the night. They often met the locals, and held long conversations about the river itself, hearing mesmerising tales, even the renditions of past mystics and poets about the revered Indus. They were able to glean information about the flora and fauna they had seen, such as the king storks, the wild geese, the fruit bats, the blind Indus dolphins and the small turtles.

But if the river was dying, Malik said, so was life in and around it. And yet, to their surprise, they found an invasive plant species, usually found in stagnant ponds in Brazil, happily thriving and floating in the Indus. However, there were other elements that were going to be erased. For instance, the petroglyphs near the Bhasha-Diamer dam, they were told, would be lost if the dam was built. The poverty-stricken Mohanas (indigenous fisherfolk living on bo­­ats) from Tau­nsa in the Punjab to Manchhar lake in Sindh had all but disappeared, the rafters observed. Without fish in the water, they were forced to give up their ancestral occupation and move to cities and work as labourers.

There were parts where they could not traverse as the river had dried up. For example, at one point they had to go up the Kabul river and re-enter the Indus at Attock. And between Attock and Kalabagh, as they came to Punjab, the river shrunk to a trickle and at Tarbela they saw with their own eyes what ‘dead level’ in a dam actually means. In Sindh, the Indus became wide and shallow with sand beds in the middle of the river. Instead of enjoying what could have been a three-hour boat ride, they had to trudge and push the boat as if in a desert for a good eight hours until they were able to find at least six feet of water and get into the raft and sail again. But even more than the river, it was the delta, the rafters said, that seemed to be on its deathbed.

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