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Faith vs. The Environment: The Ecological Impact of the Amarnath Yatra Pilgrimage

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The armed conflict in Kashmir has caused tremendous environmental, human, economic, and social damage. Kashmir is situated in one of the world's most resource rich and biologically diverse regions. It is home to a number of critically endangered species, melt-water that from glaciers that feed South Asia's largest rivers, and major historic and religious sites. The Shir Amarnath Yatra is a sacred Hindu pilgrimage in Kashmir. The pilgrimage route goes through the Muslim town of Pahalgam, and ends at a holy shrine to Shiva Lingam. This arduous 30-mile journey, going through sub-zero temperatures in the high mountains of the Himalayas is only accessible for a few months out of the year. Until recently, very few pilgrims braved this five-day journey. However, in recent years, the Indian government has taken strides to make the pilgrimage more accessible, and hundreds of thousands have taken advantage of this. The sheer magnitude of pilgrims attracted to the site has had a major impact on the ecology of this area. To date, no research has been conducted on the specific impacts of this pilgrimage on such a fragile environment, but the need for such investigation is evident. The residents of Pahalgam are dependent on the local environment for their livelihood, and the pilgrimage puts this in jeopardy. This paper shows how this pilgrimage has impacted the land and demonstrates the need for further investigation of the overall ecological impact of the Shir Amarnath Yatra on Kashmir.