



Cleansing the Soul, Polluting the Earth:

The Potential for Environmental
Education at the Hajj

UNDERGRADUATE HONORS THESIS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The crowding associated with the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Makkah in Saudi Arabia has led to environmental degradation in the form of increased pollution, waste generation, and the spread of communicable diseases such as Meningitis and Influenza. These environmental effects are a growing concern for the sustainability of Makkah, as more pilgrims perform the Hajj annually with the continued rise in the number of Muslims. These problems require a collective solution that includes but is not limited to educating pilgrims. This exploratory study attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of pre-Hajj awareness programs in influencing pilgrims' attitudes and behaviors with regards to their contribution to environmental degradation in Makkah during the Hajj season.

In January 2005, I interviewed twenty pilgrims from two countries, one with a well-organized pilgrim guidance program, Malaysia, and the other whose program is at the beginning of its inception, Pakistan. The goal of the study was to answer the following questions:

- How do pilgrims view the environment and health at the Hajj?
- Are pre-Hajj awareness programs effective in guiding pilgrims?
- Is there a place for environmental education in pre-Hajj awareness programs?

Preliminary results indicated that Pakistani and Malaysian pilgrims' had similar attitudes with regards to the environment and health at the Hajj. While they did not prioritize the environment during their stay in Makkah, they did prioritize staying healthy, for the purpose of accurately performing the Hajj rituals. Moreover, the pilgrims' perceptions of pollution in Makkah were guided by one of three beliefs: the irreverence of rubbish in the Holy City of Islam, the inevitability of pollution, and the efficient cleanup of Makkah by the Makkan government after the Hajj.

Pakistani and Malaysian participants' responses also indicated that the material presented in their guidance programs had resonated with them and hence pilgrim guidance programs have the potential to be effective in shaping pilgrims' behaviors. My research also indicated that pilgrims were receptive to receiving guidance on environmental issues.

The potential for environmental education at the Hajj is significant, leading me to conclude that emphasizing the environment in future guidance programs is one way to alleviate the environmental effects of the Hajj. Combined with improved facilities and better monitoring, environmental education may be effective in working towards a more sustainable Makkan environment.