

2023 PHOTO ESSAY COMPETITION WINNER



Mountain Ghosts © Peter Mather

Winning Essay: Qoyllur Rit'i- The Snow Star Fades, Armando Vega

"Humans connect with the earth in more ways than one. Our relationship, which is in fact dependency, is physical when we plough the soil. And it's vital when we harvest the fruit of our labor. But many of us in urban settings have forgotten that this relationship is also spiritual. We have forgotten that nature has guided our understanding of the world and ourselves for time immemorial. The effects of climate change today are not only compromising our survival but our ability to find meaning.

Such is the case of Quechua pilgrims who every year trek across the Peruvian Andes to pay tribute to a slowly disappearing glacier. The 'Andean cosmivision' believes that the sun, moon, mountains, stars and, like in this case, glaciers are sacred. About 99% of the world's tropical glaciers are in the Andes, 70%

found in Peru alone. Half of them have disappeared in the last 50 years due to global warming. This pilgrimage – a UNESCO Cultural Heritage – is under threat.

I have been documenting the pilgrimage since 2017 and began noticing the diminishing size of the glacier every year. The spiritual significance of Lord of Qoyllur Rit'i (Snow Star) and this glacier, which used to attract close to 90,000 pilgrims every year before the pandemic, is as striking as it is powerful. They say faith can move mountains, but in this case, it is glaciers that move people.

This photo essay tells the story of a 200-year-old pilgrimage through the lens of culture, the environment, and climate change. My work exposes a remote world that is hidden from many and an intimate aspect of ourselves we forget in our fast-paced, hectic urban settings.

I hope the pilgrims' display of veneration to an element of Mother Earth can change people's perception of nature not only as a resource to be exploited for our communal gains but as a gift that must be preserved as a window to the human spirit. The pilgrimage had been canceled for 2 years due to Covid-19—first time since 1780."

Armando Vega is a Mexican documentary photographer and National Geographic Explorer. His work focuses on the relationship between indigenous people and their territory, as well as more general themes of the environment, climate change, and migration. Recently, he has been heavily involved in scientific expeditions and environmental conservation projects. In 2017 he documented one of Peru's largest Andean pilgrimages, earning him an Early Career grant from National Geographic. He has photographed everything from remote communities in the Sierra Tarahumara in Mexico to paleontological expeditions searching for dinosaur fossils in the Argentine and Chilean Patagonia. In July 2019, he was selected to photograph the total solar eclipse in Chile from a National Geographic plane. Vega's work has been exhibited in Australia, Germany, Guatemala, Colombia, Argentina, Peru, Italy, and Mexico. In addition, he has worked and/or published with National Geographic, ICRC, Disney, Foreign Policy, The Nation, and Gatopardo. Vega's photographs have been featured on the covers of two Spanish-language issues of *National Geographic Magazine*.

Jury Comment:

"Each of the images of the photo essay by Armando are excellent by themselves evoking strong emotions and a story. Collectively, the images give the viewer the essence of the 200-year-old tradition of the Quechua pilgrims trek across the Peruvian Andes to pay tribute to a slowly disappearing glacier. He has brought to life the journey and the pilgrims' reverence to the glacier. In his concluding image, he has captured hope in the eyes of the pilgrim that this gift of mother nature would be preserved. An excellent use of light, framing and technique combined with visualisation of his essay deserves the unanimous decision of the jury for the award."

- Divyesh Muni, 2023 Jury

"Armando's powerful images of the Qoyllur Rit'i were a unanimous decision. The essay is dynamic yet cohesive and instantly transports the viewer to this important pilgrimage in the Andes mountains, where the community gathers to pay tribute to a glacier that is slowly disappearing due to climate change."

- Ana Caroline de Lima, 2023 Jury

"Armando's photos bring with it a sense of movement and scale that transports the viewer right behind the lens. The quintessential human experiences of gathering, community, shared vision, and hope are explicitly on display, and I can't help but keep looking."

- JoJo Das, 2023 Jury





