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Shawls are so fine they can be drawn through a wedding ring

The Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir has said it will ban the trade in shahtoosh shawls, made from the hair of an endangered antelope.

The once highly-prized fashion item - said to have captivated Napoleon's wife Josephine - has been a target of sustained campaigning by conservationists.

A rare Tibetan antelope, the Chiru, has been killed in large numbers for the wool that is used to make the shawls.

India says its current Chiru population is between 70,000 to 80,000.

Pressure

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah said the move was a result of international pressure on the continued trade in shahtoosh shawls.

The shawls have been produced in the state for centuries and are of such legendary softness that they can be passed through a ring.

Before the controversy erupted over their origin, they were favoured by the rich and famous.

Shahtoosh shawls

Made from Chiru wool

Each shawl requires wool of 3-4 Chiru

Conservationists say 20,000 Chiru killed annually

India's has 70,000-80,000 Chiru

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In India, the shawls were priced between 30,000 rupees (\$700) and 100,000 rupees (\$1,600), and the international prices were even higher.

Conservationists say it takes the wool of three to four Chiru to make one shawl.

They also claim that some 20,000 Chiru are trapped and killed every year for their wool.

Following a high-profile campaign, an international ban on shahtoosh was imposed in 1995.



The endangered Tibetan antelope

Traders' defence

But traders in Jammu and Kashmir maintain the Chiru sheds its wool on bushes or rocks at the end of the Tibetan winter.

This wool, they say, is then collected and used for making the shawls.

A lot of Kashmiris depend on the shahtoosh trade and the ban will seriously affect the local economy.

"The ban has come as a jolt from the blue to all of us," Hamidullah, a member of the Shahtoosh Spinners, Weavers and Manufacturers Association, told AFP.

A trader said he has been "pushed to the wall" by the decision.

"I really have no idea what I will do," he said.

“
I am being pushed to the wall.....I really have no idea what I will do
”

A shahtoosh trader