

Keeping the Sacred, Sacred:

The Indigenous Peyote Conservation Initiative

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For 10,000 years, Indigenous peoples of the Americas have utilized and preserved their sacred medicine, peyote, from South Texas, across the Rio Grande, to Wirikuta in San Luis Potosi. In Mexico, the Wixaritari, Yaqui, Cora, and Tarahumara collect the medicine as an integral part of their way of life and agricultural cycles. For the Wixaritari, residents of the Sierras, there is no separation between their staple foods — corn and deer — and their relationship to the cactus (*Lophophora williamsii*). For tribes North of the Rio Grande, peyote use came more recently, a Spiritual Medicine addressing ongoing colonial trauma and a central guide to maintaining Indigenous identity, religion, and cultural sovereignty in a rapidly changing world.

Pilgrimage and community harvest in the native gardens of the peyote have always been a part of this way of life, for the whole community and members of all ages. Pilgrimage begins the Wixaritari agricultural cycle and the connecting of sacred sites that make up their world. Native Americans of the United States and Canada travel to South Texas, to the gardens, to present offerings and prayers, and collect what medicine is needed for the healing and celebration ceremonies of the coming year.

CONSERVING A THREATENED WAY OF LIFE

This sacred way of life, which connects Native communities to annual cycles and to crucial community activities that maintain ancestral traditions and knowledge, is increasingly threatened.

Peyote can be a central guide to maintaining Indigenous identity, religion, and cultural sovereignty in a rapidly changing world.

In South Texas, in the United States, it's almost entirely stopped. Threats are ecological, economic, and political. The Indigenous Peyote Conservation Initiative (IPCI) was formed in 2017 to respond to this crisis, almost 100 years after the first Native American Church (NAC) was incorporated. Led by the National Council of Native American Churches (NCNAC); Boulder, Colorado's Native American Rights Fund (NARF); and a generous group of philanthropists including RiverStyx Foundation, IPCI determined that a unified, Native-led, community-supported, spiritually and ecologically designed effort was needed to protect their sacred medicine and way of life.

Peyote spiritual practices have needed protection through modern legal strategies for a long time. In 1918, the first Native American Church was incorporated in Oklahoma to protect the peyote way of life as a religion. Even still, people were prosecuted and jailed for using their medicine because peyote was considered a Schedule 1 controlled substance under federal and state law. Only in 1994, when an amendment to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) was enacted,

PHOTO: Nicholas Iron Rope, making an offering. CREDIT: Cody Swift.





did federal law clarify that federally recognized Tribal members' use of peyote for traditional religious purposes was protected in the United States. But AIRFA was not enough to protect from the real threats to the Medicine Way of Life: lack of access to the private ranch lands in the gardens, improper and overharvesting, root-plowing, industrial agriculture, mining, oil and natural gas production, poaching, and illegal sales to non-Natives in the United States and Europe.

NEW BEGINNINGS TAKE ROOT

In 2017, the NCNAC — comprised of the presidents of the Native American Church of Oklahoma, Native American Church of South Dakota, Native American Church of North America, and Azee Bee Nagaha of Dine Nation (ABNDN) — gathered in Laredo, Texas to form the Indigenous Peyote Conservation Initiative. Great fortune would have it that they were offered and accepted a philanthropic gift of a 605-acre ranch in the Peyote Gardens to root the new organization. This conservation effort will exist to sustain the spiritual practices of Indigenous peoples for generations to come, promoting health, well-being, and Native cultural revitalization through sovereignty and sustainability of the sacred peyote plant and the lands on which it grows. Key components of the project in Texas include:

- A new system of Native-led peyote harvesting and distribution, based on respectful land access patterns, to provide spiritually and

ecologically harvested medicine to Indigenous communities.

- Resumption of Native pilgrimages, where grandparents and children can harvest for their family and community ceremony together, giving offerings and learning about the life cycle of the plant, the other organisms who live with it, and the spiritual and community health its ceremonies sustain.

The conservation effort will sustain the spiritual practices of Indigenous peoples for generations to come, promoting health, well-being and Native cultural revitalization.

- Ecological assessments and repopulation on the surrounding ranches from the nursery on the spiritual homesite, a nursery managed in culturally appropriate ways by a Native conservation manager, youth and families, and communities on pilgrimage.

- Youth programs and cultural events that would bring many Native languages, architectures, and ceremonies to the gardens, which would in turn support sovereign responsibility and access to those living across the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

Today, the IPCI Spiritual Homesite in the Peyote Gardens has hosted five pilgrimages for offerings and harvests, and has an onsite host and conservation manager. Leases are in development with local landowners for upwards of 10,000 acres, and assessments of peyote density and health are underway. A culturally appropriate nursery and distribution center are being built by hand in adobe by community members, as well as a welcome center, youth housing, and a bathhouse. Native American Church/ABNDN members from around the country return the medicine's cleanings (its skin, duff, and hair), which are cleaned off before use, to be spread back on the land. Hundreds of people have already visited the offering garden to learn about the medicine's history, ecology, and spiritual tradition. In 2020, the new distribution and replanting projects will begin, putting the care of medicine directly in the hands and hearts of the Indigenous people who rely on it for their way of life.

