



# Sacred Peyote Conservation: Respecting Indigenous Traditions

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*Youth and children's harvest on native lands,  
Peyote gardens, South Texas*

THIS IS A POWERFUL MOMENT in human history. Almost eight billion people live on planet Earth, each seeking health, happiness, and a future for their children. Water, land, safety, mental health, and consciousness are all of deep concern—no matter your level of direct impact by economic, climate, political and cultural change.

For the indigenous peoples of North America, these deep concerns are playing out in the context of our sacred lifeways. Our people are intimately connected with Mother Nature and her bounty, whether we are the buffalo people of the American plains, the salmon people of the Pacific Northwest, or the Peyote people of Mexico, the United States, and Canada. As the Earth experiences profound changes, holding on to our sacred lifeways becomes more essential.

Indigenous tribes have been misunderstood for centuries; they are sometimes as invisible as the air we breathe. There are many misconceptions about our viewpoints in the world. As the world gets more populated and more complicated, indigenous peoples have an ever-growing, now urgent, desire to protect what is sacred for the coming generations of our children and grandchildren. We have a constant battle of healing and survival, and the Peyote Religions, popularly known as the Native American Church in the U.S. and Canada, is growing because it is a healing home. It gives us hope that for the coming generations there will be more and more healing. So, we are asking ourselves about how to care for and nurture our medicine, espe-



*Spiritual offering in the gardens,  
Peyote gardens, South Texas*

cially in the native lands where the Peyote grows, for our future generations. You will understand that even more when you become a grandparent. And as you get older these issues of what you are going to leave your grandkids becomes at the forefront of your mind, your being, and your movements.

The Indigenous Peyote Conservation Initiative (IPCI) was formed in 2017 by the National Council of Native American Churches, after the Peyote Research Project (PRP), commissioned by the Native American Church of North America. The PRP showed us that the sacred plant Peyote was threatened, both in terms of populations and quality of the plant, and also in terms of the expression of indigenous sovereignty over the medicine, pilgrimage, and spiritual harvest. It was time to reconnect to conservation, direct responsibility, and renewed spiritual relationship to the entire growth cycle of our medicine.

Peyote, and the indigenous Peyote Religions, have been around for thousands of years. Our brothers and sisters from the south—living in what is now known as Mexico—have been utilizing this ancestral medicine as long as they have lived and moved throughout the Sierra Madre mountains all the way to

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the Pacific Ocean. Those of us living in the U.S. and Canada today utilize this medicine for our healing and reconnection to the ways of our ancestors. Peyote is fundamentally woven

into our existence and has led to many healings of people, families and communities.

Whether we live in the U.S., Canada, or Mexico, all indigenous Peyote peoples have challenges to the sustainability of our medicine, our lifeways, and our medicine supply. These challenges are due to exploitative and imbalanced land management practices. Mining, oil and gas development, wind turbine development, rancher root plowing, cattle grazing, poaching, over harvesting and improper harvesting by the current licensed dealers (“peyoteros”) and their contract pickers, all contribute to the crisis we face.

We are uniting the indigenous peyote peoples of North America to preserve and conserve this medicine, our sacred plant Peyote, through IPCI. Today, collectively, our intent and goal is to learn from the medicine by living with it, nurturing it firsthand, and embracing conservation values at every level,

*Tipi in the morning sky,  
Peyote gardens, South Texas*

from the health of the land, to every stage of the growth cycle, to spiritual and ecological harvesting, and supporting bona fide indigenous churches and governance structures.

With the generosity of several philanthropists, including Riverstyx Foundation and Dr. Bronner's, 605 acres of land were secured in southern Texas in the heart of Peyote country. We now have the ability to be first-hand on the land, to see and feel and connect with the medicine. Through this organic experience, for ourselves and our children and grandchildren, we learn how to listen, conserve, and protect this sacred plant for our continued way of life. We use this as a spiritual homesite or home base for indigenous peyote tribes. In these last couple years, IPCI is building (with community labor) a home for a caretaker, pilgrimage hosting capacity, a welcome center, youth programs, and education for families. We are hosting ceremony and regional conservation, engaging in our own indigenous regulation.

As a "controlled substance," Peyote has been under the criminal law control of the federal government and the government of Texas for half a century. In the early 1970s, with the enactment of the federal controlled substances law, Peyote was classified as a Schedule 1 drug. Native peoples were allowed an exemption to utilize their medicine by the federal Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). In the United States Peyote only grows in the state of Texas. The Texas licensed distribution ("peyotero") system was a regulatory companion to the federal exemption for Native religious use of Peyote.

The Texas distributors legally harvest, sell, and distribute, but do not necessarily consider our values of spiritual and ecological sustainability. We are working within the structure and framework of these federal and state laws, cooperatively, to forge a new and creative way to Peyote conservation and sustainability to ensure spiritual harvest for the next seven generations and beyond. The rancher community in south Texas is an ally in this initiative. We respect them as the longstanding landowners and caretakers of the Peyote Gardens. Today we have an opportunity to take the initiative to further our own healing and be the caretakers of our medicine firsthand, through our own land, and



lease partnerships with our fellow neighboring ranchers. For the first time in 100 years, we have a chance to once again be full respectful stewards of the plant, its conservation, and to ensure its access and distribution is spiritually (with proper offerings and prayer) and ecologically managed. As we return to spiritual harvest, where we always give back with prayer, offerings, and regenerative care, our youth, elders, and family are regaining medicine sovereignty and taking responsibility.

When you look at the challenges of Peyote access today, we are in a new era, with the supply and demand crisis we have known about and new threats to our medicine, including new efforts to decriminalize all "plant medicines." We are listening and watching; our membership is learning what these changes mean and how they will affect Peyote. Without being consulted in these movements, we are left wondering and concerned. The Western mind and the psychedelic movement are for sure playing catch-up on understanding the indigenous view of life and

experience in this country. Though it is difficult: Imagine walking a mile in someone else's moccasins! Like different children, each medicine needs its own care, tending, and attention, and respect for its stewards as well. Maybe some will develop some empathy towards indigenous tribes and the daily struggle for our cultural survival. What does it mean to have a sacred medicine—relied upon for survival, fought for throughout history in decade after decade of persecution by all governments, local, state, and federal, and mainstream religious organizations—still be threatened?

So, we are learning what “decrim” means and whether it will affect us in a negative or positive way. Will it lead to increased pressures and another colonial imposition on our medicine? Or will this new movement respect indigenous sovereignty and responsibility? We do not want our way of life and our medicine to be part of the sixth wave of species extinctions happening today.

Like with water in our dominant culture, we don't realize its preciousness and that we are taking advantage of it. It's the same with this Peyote medicine: How we approach it is of upmost importance. If we don't understand these implications, maybe we can take our cue from the indigenous peoples who have stewarded this medicine for centuries, and think about it before we take it without understanding what that would mean for the indigenous peoples of this land. What does it look like to not just think of this as a plant containing a psychedelic compound, but as a whole way of life to be respected and not tampered with?

As this “psychedelic renaissance” takes place, it is very important that we not repeat the mistakes of the past: broken treaties, stolen lands and natural resources, and stolen religions and rituals. IPCI asks that we respect indigenous sovereignty over the medicine as this renaissance happens. For practical purposes, this means understanding that the indigenous use of Peyote is a way of life that was also born to address health and trauma. These are communities that have addiction, youth suicide, and poverty beyond any other population in the United States. Rather than feel entitled to this medicine, it would be good to support indigenous communities the way they want to be supported, by allowing them to regulate and have jurisdiction over this medicine in a way that is entwined with their community, mental health needs, and the futures of health and cultural vitality they seek for their grandchildren.

The community engaging in the psychedelic renaissance has the choice to allow this cultural change to happen without stealing, once again, from the Native peoples of the Americas. We believe people committed to healing are capable of rising to the occasion of understanding the complexity and nuance associated with this particular medicine and will not brush native peoples concerns about the pressures and problems with use and interest in mainstream culture and inclusion of the word Peyote in decriminalization measures. Be an example of support from brothers and sisters of different backgrounds, and support keeping this way of life alive through respect. Supporting

indigenous peoples' medicine sovereignty is part of weaving the unity between all cultures required to realize the preservation of diversity and health on Earth in these times.

What this means practically:

- Disseminate information about Peyote conservation issues
- Do not buy Peyote
- If you are non-indigenous, please look for alternative plant medicines, i.e., use medicine for your own health and well-being that does not have the ecological or historical/cultural issues of Peyote
- Do not use outside of a bona fide Native American Church context
- Don't assume Western fixes (like nursery production in urban areas) are respectful
- Support and give funding to Native-led organizations

For more information go to [www.IPCI.Life](http://www.IPCI.Life) or feel free to contact us directly at [info@ipci.life](mailto:info@ipci.life).

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*Steve Moore, Senior attorney at NARF Mr. Moore has been supporting Native American Church of North America since 1983, providing legal protections for access to their peyote sacrament as well as water rights, sacred land rights, and repatriation of human remains. Mr. Moore's legal experience and relationship to the NAC is crucial to the peyote conservation efforts.*