

Indigenous Medicine Conservation

Foundational During the Psychedelic Movement

Miriam Volat



In the Spring of 2020, a handful of us working in Peyote conservation wrote a piece for the *MAPS Bulletin* exploring the relationship between Peyote conservation work and the budding psychedelic movement. It was titled “[Sacred Peyote Conservation: Respecting Indigenous Traditions](#).”¹ In the two years since, the potentially healing psychedelic renaissance has continued to evolve, weaving together many big dreams, and big concerns.

The pace of the psychedelic field continues to accelerate. There are a plethora of emerging strategies, new ventures, trainings, clinics, policy efforts, popular media explorations, and conferences. And, as in any big shift in social mores, there is awareness of new concerns—and a responsibility to address unintended consequences while attending to the complexity for community members across cultures, for the benefit of all.

In these times of “Peak Everything”—human economies are shifting from expansion to contraction as we pass our ability to increase extraction of oil/carbon, water, soil nutrients, etc.; polarized politics; the sixth greatest extinction (the Holocene or Anthropocene extinction—ongoing dramatic loss of species on planet earth. Unlike previous extinction eras, this is in great part due to unsustainable human use of land, air, energy, and water); climate disruption; disconnection and violence. It is no wonder we have a mental health epidemic and we must look for nexus and intersectional solutions. What if the psychedelic renaissance can offer support in healing from personal trauma leading to more healthy, whole individuals while also supporting public and community health at systemic levels? What if the way we increase access and integrate these modalities into society—medical, legal, commercial, social norms, knowledge, etc.—can be done in such a way that honors the principles of *Do No Harm* and maintenance of *Respectful Relationships*?

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¹ Ali, I. L., J.D., Booher, L., J.D., & Ginsberg, N. L. (2021, March 9). Beyond Oregon: A New Drug Policy Horizon in the U.S. *MAPS Bulletin* - Winter 2021, 31(1).

For the psychedelic field to be truly successful, and for us to be deeply proud of what we are creating and how we are bringing healing to individuals and communities, we have to consider the impact of this movement on traditional knowledge-holding communities, ancestral medicines, and their ecosystems. As we address the negative impacts of the drug wars, usher in our ability to address the mental health crisis at scale, and dramatically increase our collective healing, we have the opportunity to avoid more damage to cultures, communities and territories that have been injured by mainstreaming and colonial ways of doing business in the past.

Peyote and Indigenous Peyote Conservation

Since the aforementioned article, the Peyote conservation effort in the U.S. has continued with significant progress made. Early this year, the [Indigenous Peyote Conservation Initiative \(IPCI\)](https://www.ipci.life/)² initiated a nursery approved by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in the native Peyote habitat. The nursery is managed by Native American Church ceremonial leaders and it was designed to bring abundance back to the over-harvested and declining native Peyote habitat of the U.S. Despite Native Americans's ceremonial use of Peyote being legally protected, there is no precedent for having access to the infrastructure and land needed to ensure regenerated growth cycles and re-balanced populations through cultivation and culturally managed repopulation of threatened habitat. The half-acre nursery is just one part of ensuring that spiritual and ecological harvesting can include not only harvests done with offerings and proper methods, allowing for re-growth, but also that seeds and seedlings go back into over-harvested and newly harvested areas. This is a historic step for Native communities to be able to directly repopulate the Southern Texas region at the scale of hundreds of thousands (current estimated goal exceeds 2 million per year) of plants. It is also a step toward better understanding the dynamics of this ecological restoration supported by both scientific and traditional cultural knowledge.

In another historic accomplishment this year, the DEA also approved a large-scale repatriation of Peyote through legal import. The medicine was rescued from a greenhouse in Canada and brought home to provide seed stock for the replanting of over-harvested areas of the South Texas habitat. Local landowners and ranchers in the Texas Peyote territory are partnering in this regeneration. Conservation leases initiated over the last years will create access to thousands of acres of native habitat for ecological and spiritual harvest. Though much more work

and land access is needed, these are critical steps towards the region coming back into harmony for an abundant and sustainable future. Repatriation efforts and habitat restoration activities take a biocultural approach and are supported by a collaboration between scientists and traditional knowledge keepers.

Also initiated this year, the Comanche Native American Church has begun construction on its own nursery for propagation and cultivation and sustainable land access to ensure future medicine for each of its members and ceremonial needs in Oklahoma and beyond. Native American Church groups are working on federal resources for land preservation and ceremonial protections, and there is now financial and technical support available for cultivation and/or greenhouse efforts for any Native American Church Chapter that wishes to grow medicine for its own members or for repopulation. In combination, these efforts represent some of the most significant leverage points towards the sustainability of Peyote in the U.S.: the repopulation of wild habitat, conservation harvesting, medicine sovereignty, direct access and cultural strengthening and reconnection, and regional cultivation – efforts which are held and directed by Native leadership.

Partnership as White Allies

Lessons Learned

These are not small accomplishments, and achieving them has required a very careful approach. From this work with Peyote Community Activists, philanthropists continue to learn about the complex dynamics of the role of non-Native allies in partnership with Indigenous leadership. Decision making authority over the use of resources, speakers, messaging, and strategy belongs to Indigenous leadership. We pay delicate attention to pacing—an iterative, slower engagement which gives time for representative processes and honoring different kinds of communication styles; and careful attention given to make sure mainstream thinking and technical support is collaborative with culture. For example, the design of the culturally appropriate Peyote nursery on the IPCI spiritual homesite took three years to design while incorporating various cultural mores and scientific knowledge about cultivation. This led to a beautiful germination chamber built into the soil by hand, made of clay from the native habitat with passive temperature control.

Working from principles of *Do No Harm* and *Right Relationship*, guided by traditional knowledge and elders, sets a stage for honoring relational approaches to carrying out projects. This approach ensures that those who are arguably most impacted from the challenges that come from globalization, and in particular those ecological and cultural pressures that arise from the psychedelic renaissance itself, do not get overlooked or disrespected.

² [Indigenous Peyote Conservation Initiative. August 26, 2022. https://www.ipci.life/](https://www.ipci.life/)

Beyond Peyote

Keystone Medicines, Biocultures and Indigenous Medicine Conservation

After the past seven years of supporting Indigenous-led Peyote biocultural conservation, in 2020, [Riverstyx Foundation](https://www.riverstyxfoundation.org/)³ and [Dr. Bronners](https://www.drbronner.com/),⁴ became seed funders for the [Indigenous Medicine Conservation Fund \(IMC Fund\)](https://www.imc.fund/).⁵ The IMC Fund is an Indigenous-led philanthropic vehicle working to ensure the resilience of traditional medicine holders in the face of cultural pressures, environmental extractivism, human rights violations, and climate change. The IMC Fund directly supports biocultural conservation of five keystone (fundamental) psychedelic medicines: Peyote, Iboga, Ayahuasca, Toads, and Mushrooms. These medicines all have generations upon generations of historical traditional use as part of living biocultures—inseparably intertwined people, territories, and medicines—and the unbroken lineages of spiritual-medical practices. While these traditions may have evolved with time, they are still very much rooted in ancestral ways and worldviews. Unlike modern therapeutic psychedelic treatments where modalities and methods of treatment need to be created, these spiritual-medical systems have an intact, long-lasting living guidance for how medicine work is woven into personal and community health.

Along with amplifying the traditional voices crucial for protecting the health of their cultures, for humanity and the planet, the decision-making body of the IMC Fund—made up of representatives from each of the biocultures—supports requests from Indigenous communities for financial and capacity-building assistance to the folks on the ground who know best what work needs to be done for their medicines and their people. This includes purchases of land; construction of community spaces; radio and art programs; medicine growing and knowledge sharing; ceremonial activities and governance, also supporting partnerships with Universities to conduct ecological assessments, as in the case of the Toad.

³ [Riverstyx Foundation. August 26, 2022. https://www.riverstyxfoundation.org/](https://www.riverstyxfoundation.org/)

⁴ [Dr. Bronner's. August 26, 2022. https://www.drbronner.com/](https://www.drbronner.com/)

⁵ [Indigenous Medicine Conservation Fund. August 26, 2022. https://www.imc.fund/](https://www.imc.fund/)

The Psychedelic Movement and Traditional Indigenous Cultures

Right Relationship, Conscious Action

For the benefit of all, in the last few years, more and more efforts to work toward a positive relationship between the psychedelic movement and Indigenous medicine communities are emerging: Conferences such as [Horizons](https://www.horizonspbc.com/)⁶ are elevating Indigenous voices, [Chacruna Institute's](https://www.chacruna.net/)⁷ [Indigenous Reciprocity Initiative](https://www.chacruna-iri.org/),⁸ [Woven Science's El Puente](https://www.wovenscience.com/),⁹ and other philanthropic efforts inside organizations are becoming more common.

We need a paradigm of listening and trust-building between Indigenous communities, funders, and community organizers. Operating principles of Do No Harm, Right Relationship, and Indigenous Leadership need to be the collective vision set for the psychedelic space to reduce the harm from increasing global pressure. We need to put structures in place that strengthen traditional medicine practices and the people and cultures that steward them. Mechanisms for benefit-sharing by the psychedelic industry and the awareness of the impact of our actions on Indigenous communities should be built into the fabric of the psychedelic movement going forward, and we should continue to educate one another about these principles and their importance. We invite all people to adopt these frameworks as a base for their engagement in all aspects of the psychedelic renaissance: in healing and work in policy, programmatic design, finances and economy and business design. What are the consequences if we don't?

Projecting 50 years into the future, we want to be able to look back and say that the psychedelic movement, in its quest for societal healing, did not harm these still-vibrant traditional biocultures, but actually led to an increased potential for future healing for everyone involved. Through this awareness we may also have an opportunity for healing in the relationship between the mainstream, dominant culture and those cultures with generational colonial trauma. The psychedelic movement should strive for healing far beyond the individual— in fact, this kind of systemic healing is a necessary condition for true individual healing and health. By supporting Indigenous decision making, guidance, and sovereignty, and not further exploiting aspects of traditional cultures, we are actually taking a step toward this systemic-level healing.

⁶ [Horizons PBC. August 26, 2022. https://www.horizonspbc.com/](https://www.horizonspbc.com/)

⁷ [Chacruna Institute of Psychedelic Plant Medicines. August 26, 2022. https://chacruna.net/](https://chacruna.net/)

⁸ [Charuna's Indigenous Reciprocity Initiative. August 26, 2022. https://chacruna-iri.org/](https://chacruna-iri.org/)

⁹ "El Puente," [Woven Science. August 26, 2022. https://www.wovenscience.com/elpuente](https://www.wovenscience.com/)