

Preserving Peyote

Native American Church leaders ask that the sacred cactus not be decriminalized

By Connor Yearsley

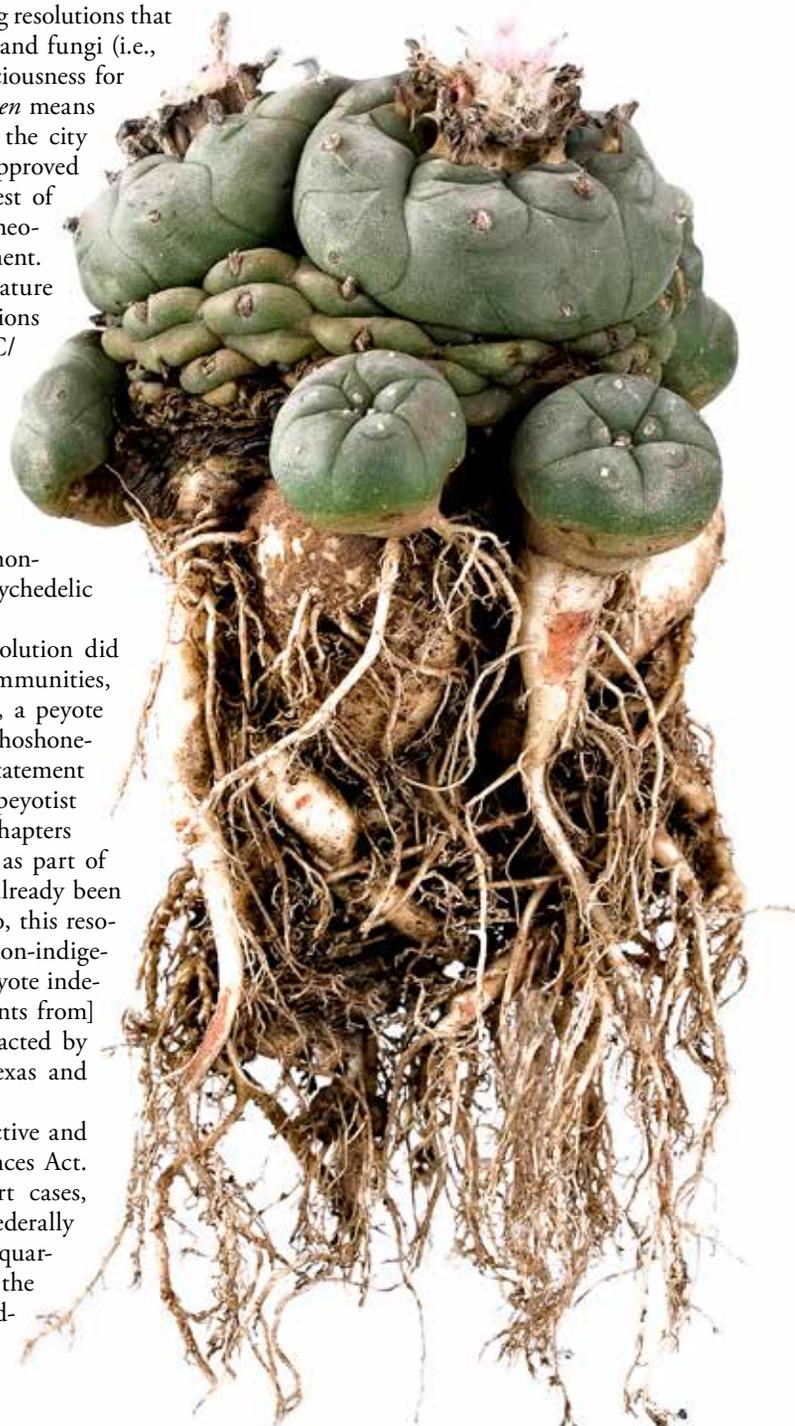
In March 2020, the National Council of Native American Churches (NCNAC) and the Indigenous Peyote Conservation Initiative (IPCI) released a joint statement requesting that decriminalization efforts exclude peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*, Cactaceae) cactus. They believe that decriminalizing peyote would put additional environmental stress on the already severely declining wild populations of this medicinal and psychoactive cactus, which is sacred to members of the Native American Church (NAC) and other North American indigenous peoples.¹

In the United States, many cities are considering resolutions that would decriminalize various entheogenic plants and fungi (i.e., those that produce an unordinary state of consciousness for religious or spiritual purposes; in Greek, *entheogen* means “generating the divine within”). In June 2019, the city council of Oakland, California, for example, approved a resolution making “the investigation and arrest of individuals involved with the adult use of entheogenic plants” a low priority for law enforcement. The nonprofit organization Decriminalize Nature wrote and lobbied for the resolution, which mentions peyote. This resolution prompted the NCNAC/IPCI statement.^{2,3}

“Any local governmental resolution that gives [non-indigenous] people the impression that they now have rights to acquire, possess, use, or transport ... peyote in or from Texas would be misleading and may lead to their prosecution,” the statement reads. It also suggests that non-indigenous people who want to experience psychedelic substances should seek alternatives.¹

“It was obvious to me that the Oakland resolution did not involve any consultation with indigenous communities, particularly the NAC,” said Dawn Davis, PhD, a peyote researcher, lifelong peyotist, member of the Shoshone-Bannock tribes of Idaho, and a signer of the statement (oral communication, March 20, 2020). “As a peyotist and member of the NAC, I believe that most chapters of the NAC would not want to include peyote as part of this resolution, because, first of all, peyote has already been decriminalized for use by indigenous peoples. So, this resolution is essentially [allowing] for use by [some] non-indigenous people. Unless these people are growing peyote independently, they would most likely seek out [plants from] wild populations, which are already being impacted by the increase in psychedelic tourism both in Texas and Mexico.”

Peyote is listed in Schedule I, the most restrictive and punitive schedule of the US Controlled Substances Act. However, after decades of advocacy and court cases, peyote was legalized for use by members of federally recognized Native American tribes with one quarter Native American blood, with the passing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments of 1994.¹



Peyote *Lophophora williamsii*
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“If you had asked me 10 years ago, I would have been supportive of removing peyote from Schedule I,” Davis said. “But, after witnessing what is actually happening with peyote and realizing that its decline is steeper than it was 10 years ago, I think that having it listed as a Schedule I substance has provided a lot of protection for peyote, because that is a huge deterrent for people.”

Davis was raised as part of the NAC. “I was part of the NAC before I even realized it was called the NAC,” she said. “We used to call them ‘peyote meetings.’ It wasn’t until I was in my 20s that I understood that this was the NAC.... I have had a relationship with this medicine my entire life. For me, it is sacred in a way that is hard to explain. I feel a responsibility to protect this plant for use by indigenous peoples but also to protect the plant for [the sake of] the plant.”

Peyote is native to limestone soils of the Tamaulipan thornscrub ecoregion and the Chihuahuan Desert of

southwestern Texas and northern Mexico.⁴ Its limited range is a significant factor in its decline.¹ About 95% of Texas land is privately owned, which means that most or all peyote from the United States comes from private land, Davis noted. That means that to obtain peyote, members of the NAC either need to have relationships with landowners or go through state-sanctioned peyote distributors (*peyoteros*). Davis is concerned that decriminalizing peyote would cause more trespassing and poaching like was seen in the 1970s, and this may strain, not strengthen, relations with landowners.

“Some state-recognized tribal people are not afforded rights to peyote,” Davis added. “So, that is a problem. I recognize that decriminalizing peyote may allow state-recognized tribes to use peyote. But I believe that is a battle that needs to be handled separately from the decriminalize movements that are currently happening in US cities. I believe that the right for state-recognized tribes to partake in peyote needs to happen at a higher level.”

Dennis McKenna, PhD, a renowned expert on psychoactive plants and fungi, has a different perspective. “The notion that any organism should be ‘criminalized’ is abhorrent,” he wrote (email, April 23, 2020). “This is reflective of the attitude that humans own nature. I do not believe that humans own nature, and I believe that these psychedelic organisms are not the property of any group, even indigenous peoples. They are a common heritage of humanity. Use of any organism, as medicine, food, or for other purposes, is an expression of symbiosis. To prohibit an organism’s use by humans in symbiotic relationships is the wrong solution.

“We recognize that plants like peyote have been sustained for generations under the stewardship of indigenous peoples,” McKenna added. “Their role as stewards, not owners, of these species should be recognized and protected. But to restrict access to peyote for all but indigenous peoples is not the correct solution, in my opinion. Instead, we should seek to create a consensus within the psychedelic community, which includes both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, that overharvesting and environmental degradation of peyote habitats is wrong and should be prohibited by law.”

Peyote: The Divine Messenger

Peyote is a small, bulbous, spineless, soft cactus that is usually blue-green to gray-green with pink to white flowers. This slow-growing species may take 10-30 years to mature before flowering, which causes



Peyote Lophophora williamsii
Photo ©2020 Dawn Davis

conservation concerns. Most of the plant grows underground. Only its top, or “button,” which can be three inches in diameter when mature, is visible.^{5,6} Peyote often can be found growing underneath the creosote bush (*Larrea tridentata*, Zygophyllaceae), also known locally as *chaparral* or *gobernadora*.⁷

The buttons are cut off but can regrow, according to Davis. They contain the psychedelic alkaloid mescaline, which is also present in the San Pedro cactus (*Echinopsis pachanoi*, Cactaceae). Mescaline reportedly is one of the most selective serotonergic psychedelics.⁸ The buttons are bitter and may be eaten fresh or dried, brewed into a liquid, or ground into powder.^{6,9} The mescaline content percentage is higher when the buttons are dried instead of fresh.⁸

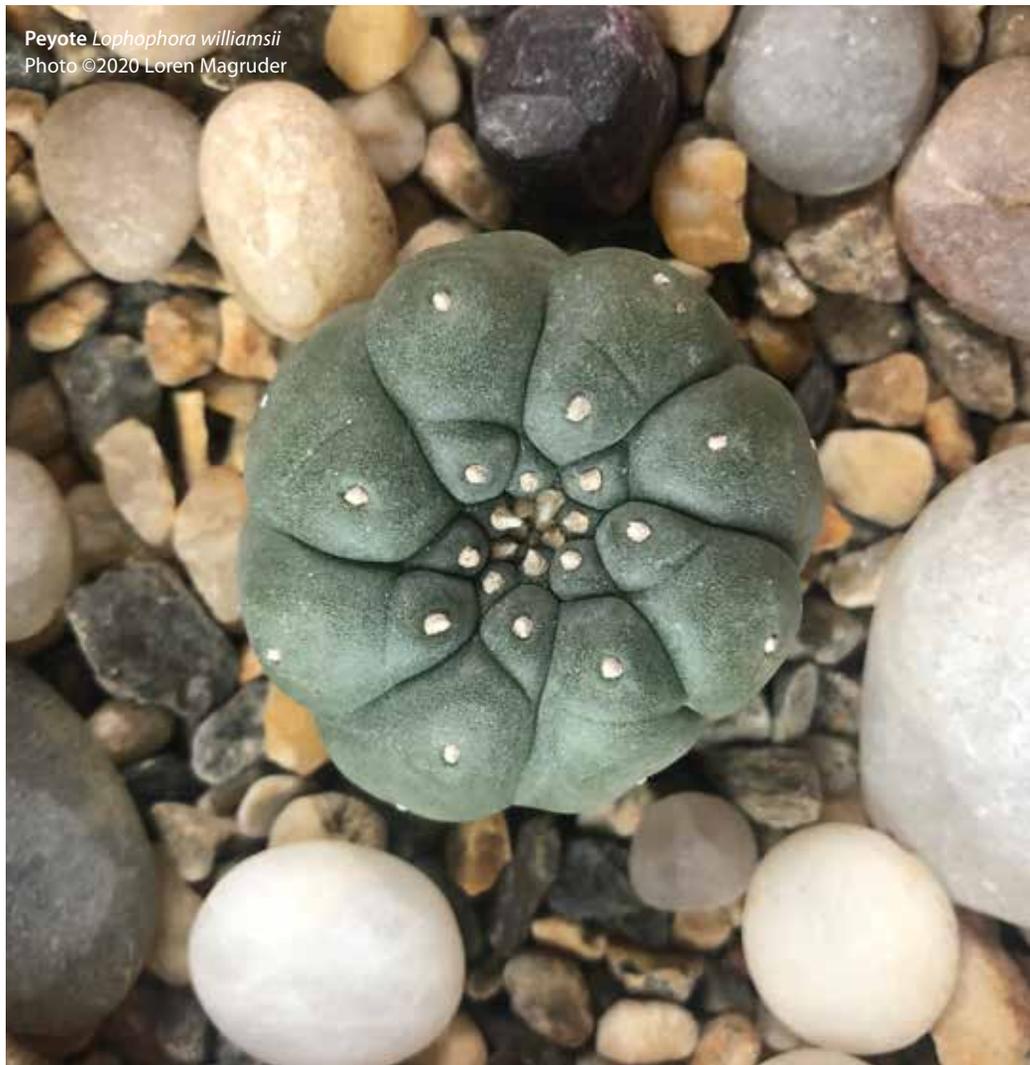
Peyote and mescaline’s effects resemble those of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and psilocybin mushrooms (primarily from the fungal genus *Psilocybe* [Hymenogastreae]).⁸ Ingestion of the cactus can cause mystical feelings, visual and auditory hallucinations, distorted perceptions of time and space, nausea and vomiting, increased heart rate and body temperature, impaired coordination, euphoria, and anxiety.^{6,8,9} These effects typically peak within two hours but can last eight hours or longer.⁸ Despite its Schedule I status, peyote (or mescaline) may be able to treat mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and addictions, and may reduce criminal behavior.^{2,10}

“Peyote” is thought to derive from a Nahuatl word, which may mean “silk cocoon or caterpillar’s cocoon,” perhaps because of the tufts that grow from the plant, but sources vary on the translation. The cactus has been used for millennia. Archaeological remains of peyote buttons from caves along the Rio Grande in Texas suggest that indigenous peoples knew about the plant’s psychoactive effects about 5,700 years ago or more.¹¹ The earliest known European record of peyote is from the Spanish Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590), who wrote: “There is another herb like tunas [*Opuntia* spp., Cactaceae] of the earth. It is called Peiotl.... Those who eat or drink it see visions either frightful or laughable.”¹²

In the late 1800s, peyote was adopted more widely, as northern and eastern Native American tribes were forced to relocate to reservations in the West and were introduced to the cactus through contact with southwestern tribes like the Lipan Apache, Carrizo/Comecrudo, and Huichol (Wixáritari).⁷ The Huichol people of northern Mexico make peyote pilgrimages through the desert and stop to use more peyote along the way. According to their legend, a Huichol hunter stalked a blue deer, which escaped across the desert and left peyote cacti in its tracks. The Huichol believe peyote connects them to the spirit world.^{6,13}

Peyote reportedly was incorporated into NAC rituals in the late 1800s. Today, the NAC, which combines elements of Christianity and Native American ritual, has more than 200,000 members from many tribes and is the largest indigenous religion in the United States. Peyote has been called the *sine qua non* (an absolutely essential part) of the NAC and is consumed as a sacrament during all-night services. But now, due to supply shortages, it is not uncommon for the buttons used during these

Peyote *Lophophora williamsii*
Photo ©2020 Loren Magruder



services to be the size of a US penny.⁷ The buttons typically sell for about 35 cents each.² Preserving peyote is vital to preserving the identity of the NAC.⁷

Davis thinks peyote was a “savior” for indigenous peoples and provided a sense of comfort during a time of removal, displacement, genocide, and warfare. Now, the cactus is threatened by human-related factors including development, mining and oil drilling, cattle ranching, plowing, poaching, and more. “The plants are being harvested before they have matured and before they have flowered [i.e., before they have produced offspring],” Davis added. “I don’t want to say that the NAC is growing to a point where the supply can’t meet the demand, but I believe that it is getting there.”

Previously, up to two million peyote buttons were harvested from the wild in Texas per year.⁴ Peyote is listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).¹⁴ Appendix II includes species that are not necessarily threatened with extinction but for which trade must be controlled to avoid overexploitation. For these species, including peyote, “an export permit or re-export certificate issued by the Management Authority of the State of export or re-export is required.”¹⁵

According to Davis, peyote cannot be cultivated legally, but people are still doing it. “For me, cultivation is plan B, because I think that the focus should be to protect peyote as a plant,” she said. “When a plant grows in its native habitat, it feeds off of that habitat. So, when you pull the plant out of its habitat and try to grow it outside of its natural range, it may not be successful.... There’s a lot to say about the sacredness of peyote in its natural habitat. It is nurtured by other plants.... Peyote contains more than 50 alkaloids. Who is to say that the alkaloidal contents would be the same if peyote is pulled out of its habitat?”

Recently, the IPCI, the Native American Rights Fund, the NCNAC, and the Riverstyx Foundation purchased a 605-acre ranch in Jim Hogg County, Texas, within the “peyote gardens.” The land, which the IPCI helps manage, is a place where indigenous peoples from around the country can pilgrimage and connect in prayer with peyote in its natural habitat, but harvesting is currently not allowed. It will also be used as a demonstration and research site to explore the *in situ* sustainability of peyote populations and propagation of peyote seedlings.^{2,16} HG

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