

STATEMENT OF DAWN D. DAVIS, PHD.
PEYOTE RESEARCHER, MEMBER OF THE NACNA LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE, AND
CO-CHAIR OF THE NCAI TASK FORCE
BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND RELATED AGENCIES
ON THE 2024 INTERIOR DEPARTMENT BUDGET
MARCH 9, 2023

REQUEST:

Department of the Interiors Office of the Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs.
We request \$5 million dollars for Peyote Habitat Conservation Initiative Demonstration Projects.

INTRODUCTION:

Greetings Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, and Members of the Committee. My name is Dr. Dawn D. Davis, I am a *Newe*, an enrolled member of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes of Fort Hall, Idaho, where I also make my home, and a lifelong member of the Native American Church (NAC). I am testifying today as an independent Peyote Researcher and as co-chair of the National Congress of the American Indians Peyote Task as well as a member of the Native American Church of North America's Legislative Committee. I am honored to submit this written statement to the subcommittee and to testify in person today.

PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PEYOTE

To share a bit more about myself, my first introduction to Peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) occurred before I took my first breath. In a Peyote meeting for the passing of my great-grandmother Bertha Tom Shay (*Newe*), my mother had Peyote medicine weeks before I was born. I was raised with Peyote and its teachings by my maternal grandparents, Lillian and LaVon Jackson, both enrolled *Newe* members. The ceremonial practice of Peyote has been in my family for many generations, and we have maintained this practice in our family today. I have sat in a Peyote meeting with four generations of my family. My grandmother Lillian, my mother Veronda, and my oldest daughter, Lilianna. In addition to being a lifelong NAC member, I have been a Peyote researcher for over 18 years. Over this period, I have spent time in south Texas interviewing and meeting with landowners, Peyoteros, and many locals, while also interviewing NAC members from across the Nation. Many of these people, I now call my friends. Because of my personal connection and belief for this revered plant medicine and the land for which it grows, I have conducted research with the utmost reverence and with a sense of responsibility for the future of wild Peyote, of which I am deeply concerned. I have earned two degrees based upon my personal and academic experience with Peyote. My master's thesis was entitled, *Peyote Preservation and Conservation in Honor of the Native American Church* and my dissertation entitled, *The Peyote Path: A Newe Perspective on Conserving a Sacred Medicine Plant in Peril*. I have also published several other writings on Peyote and the environment, sharing this work nationally and internationally.

LANDSCAPE CONCERN

Peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) has been categorized by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature as a vulnerable species, impacted essentially by two types of threats – one to the population, the other to the habitat. Peyote’s decline can be directly correlated to humans. Humans have been, by far, the largest impact drivers on the Peyote population and habitat, and continue to be, through anthropogenic activities such as agricultural modifications to the land, fossil fuel development, improper harvesting techniques by Peyote distributors, poachers extirpating populations through rugged theft, psychedelic tourism, road development, exurban growth, and other land conversions. This also includes the lack of regulatory mechanisms, proper harvesting guidelines for Peyote distributors, lack of education for Peyote’s wild population, its status, and habitat decline, and other recent threats in the form of extreme weather events, invasive species like feral hogs, wind energy, and decriminalization. But the greatest threat at a landscape scale is fragmentation due to destructive land treatments and conversion across its range.

Due to these emerging threats and the deep complexity at varying scales there is an urgent need for population and landscape level conservation that is inclusive of a multitude of stakeholders which include Federally recognized Tribal members belonging to a NAC chapter and Texas landowners. Through spatial analysis, substantial habitat loss is occurring through the conversion of the Tamaulipan brushlands of south Texas into pasture, particularly for the non-native buffelgrass (*Pennisetum ciliare*) which is a preferred forage crop.

Approximately 95% of Texas falls under private ownership, with the Big Bend National Park making up the largest acreage of federal land. Due to this ownership status, it is highly likely that Peyote habitat in the United States (US), falls 100% under private ownership within the state of Texas. This presents a unique opportunity to support voluntary land conservation easements for Texas landowners as well as an opportunity to establish regulatory mechanisms that encourage Peyote growth within the native habitat.

What we are asking for is \$5 million dollars, but will \$5 million be enough? No. It won’t be enough, but it is a starting point.

PEYOTE HABITAT RANGE

As part of my testimony, I would like to submit a map I developed as additional support. This map and the others presented today will help explain approximately how much Peyote habitat exists in the US. I want to first disclose that my analysis was limited to four Texas counties. Within these counties, I used Peyote occurrences to identify potential Peyote habitat based upon dominant vegetation and soil type. Please keep in mind that my analysis was done in what is known as the commercial area for Peyote. In other words, this region of Texas supports the best habitat in the US. The top map shows the potential habitat I delineated in my PhD dissertation. This is the habitat across Peyote’s range. Map 2, depicts the northern most extent of the range within the United States. This area makes up ~22,350,400 acres. It is likely that many areas that have the potential to support Peyote within this area, have been extirpated. For example, I

suspect that Peyote no longer occurs in the Big Bend National Park most likely due to poaching which eliminated the last known populations on the only federal public lands within the state of Texas.

The two images you see at the bottom come from the online *World Imagery Wayback* tool and depicts an example of landscape level changes in vegetation that have occurred between two points in time, 2006 and 2022. This is just one example of the profound changes that can occur over time. This area in south Texas is a revered space, referred to as the Peyote Gardens. It is becoming fragmented by roads, wind, and oil pads, exurban development, poaching, feral hogs, and the other threats previously mentioned. The imagery also shows where large swaths of Tamaulipan Brushlands have been cleared, most likely through root plowing, to establish buffelgrass. These images clearly show where buffelgrass has likely established within former Tamaulipan Brushlands, the vegetation type preferred by Peyote. It is probably safe to assume that Peyote has been extirpated in these areas.

In just over a decade, examination of aerial imagery clearly shows that the Tamaulipan Brushlands, the preferred vegetation type of Peyote, is quickly being converted to non-native vegetation types and energy development.

Where biodiversity conservation planning often focuses on preserving core habitat, usually due to the limited resources for conservation, while the larger area in which a biological species may occur is often devalued. Considering my *Newe* (Shoshone) culture recognizes that everything is important, interconnected, and related, all is important. Therefore, it is vital to consider the “big picture” and the areas where conservation should be focused. Although the range of Peyote is quite large, the analysis conducted shows that Peyote does not occur evenly or homogenously throughout its range.

CONCLUSION

In closing, I would like to share that my research has included data acquired from the Texas Department of Public Safety Office who for years monitored and recorded Peyote sales from licensed Peyoteros. However, this information is no longer available from the state and accessing data, or any inquiry under the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) has been challenging to say the least. If there is an agent or an office dedicated specifically to addressing Peyote inquiries, it is not known, but it is needed to monitor Peyote more closely. I request that Assistant Secretary of Indian affairs coordinate an interdepartmental collaboration on our behalf to assist with making this data transparent.

At one time in our history of Peyote pilgrimaging to south Texas, NAC members had the ability to harvest their own medicine through relationships they had with Texas landowners. My grandfather shared his experience doing just that. I have been lucky to also harvest my own medicine. But this is not the same for every NAC member. There is a delicate balance between the land, the Peyote sacrament, and yourself. Ceremonies, offerings, and prayers are provided. Prior to the peyotero role, NAC members had harvesting practices that encouraged regeneration and propagation, practices that those of us who can harvest still conduct today.

The intentions of land conservation efforts are not only to perpetuate Peyote populations according to traditional practices, but to also restore and build new relationships among Texas landowners and reclaim our connection to the land and to Peyote in the wild. Engagement with landowners is already occurring, however funding is needed to support our mutual efforts. Due to the already extirpated populations of Peyote in south Texas, it is imperative that federally recognized Tribal members of the NAC, and Tribes, have a more direct voice in policy considerations, and presence in the area, with further opportunities to provide beneficial consultation on land development, Peyote harvesting regulations, and agricultural conversion as they apply to Peyote.

Thank you.