



Real de Catorce, a town along the Huichol route.

Huiricuta

The Routes of the Huichols

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THE ROUTE TO HUIRICUTA AND THE CULTURAL SURVIVAL OF THE HUICHOL NATION

Although they settled 400 kilometers to the west, from time immemorial, the Huichols have visited the area next to Real de Catorce, which they call Huiricuta. The word comes from the Huichol verb *huirima*, meaning “to anoint” because the Huichols believe that different ancestor gods who live there “anoint” them magical-

ly. The word also applies to the ink obtained from the *agrito* bush that they use to paint themselves during certain rituals and to the peyote they anoint themselves with before eating it.¹ The region, visited as the culmination of the pilgrimages along the eastern route, is considered an immense “natural temple,” which in turn includes different sanctuaries. In terms of the Christian religion, this could be analogous to the case of a cathedral with different chapels. In this case, Huiricuta is a cathedral that covers more than 100,000 hectares.

The Huichols have one of the most vigorous surviving native cultures in the Americas.

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Don Alfonso o Yeucauye, as he is called in Huichol, was a great *maracame* in the community of Tuapurie. He transmitted the ancestral heritage to the young via songs and sophisticated rituals.



Humberto Fernández Borja/CHOC archive

The Huiricuta Reserve is in the Huizache region, which boasts the most important concentration of endemic rare or endangered cacti.

This has been possible because of their lands' irregular topography, their decentralized political organization and their ability to adapt to their historic surroundings, including their active participation in the history of western Mexico. However, the main factor in their cultural survival is the collective tenacity with which they have continued their ancestral traditions.

About 18,000 Huichols live in isolated hamlets spread out over more than 400,000 hectares south of the Western Sierra Madre, where the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Zacatecas and Durango converge. Their language, Huichol or *Huixárica*, lacks formal writing and is related to the coastal Sonoran languages of the Yutoaztecan linguistic group. Together with the Cora, the Tepehuan and the Mexicanero peoples, the Huichols are part of the Mesoamerican societies that belong to the Great Nayar.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the Huichol culture, highly dependent on the continued existence of their routes and the integrity of their sanctuaries, is having preserved an epistemology reconciled with nature. The chief aim of the Huichol ceremonial cycle and of their myths, intrinsic to their culture, is maintaining positive relations with the ancestors and gods who control nature and its processes.

The ancestors and gods live in the natural sacred sites where, as the Huichols say, they "express their

voices." The sanctuaries may be on islands in rivers, lagoons, waterfalls, forests, hills, caves or rocks. To visit them, the Huichols travel ancestral routes that crisscross an immense cultural area. These routes go through the mountains of the north in Tepehuan lands in the Sierra Madre itself, to the west toward the humid lands and the Nayarit coast, toward the south and Jalisco's central-west lakes; and there are still elders who even remember the route to the Valley of Mexico. However, the route toward the east, Huiricuta, is of outstanding importance in the ritual cycles because of the frequency with which it is used and the number of visitors it has.

While they travel these routes, the shamans take responsibility for recreating the tribal legacy and transmitting it to the youth and children through songs, stories and sophisticated rituals. This legacy, in addition to shaman, religious or medicinal knowledge, includes the diversified use of ecosystems or the conservation of the genetic variety of useful species. For this reason, the pilgrimages play a very specific role, like an "itinerant Mesoamerican university," the central axis of a system of knowledge based on nature, which gives the *Huixáritari*, or Huichols, their identity.

For the last five centuries, the pilgrimage has also fulfilled the function of contacting and exchanging with the mestizo and European cultures, which are

responsible for having radically transformed the natural and cultural resources of the Huichol habitat. This is the only way that the indigenous ritual time, which seeks a profound identification of people with natural processes, has managed to survive in utilitarian, rapidly changing, plundering surroundings.

HUIRICUTA'S NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESERVE

Huiricuta is a singularly important landscape in this world because of its natural and cultural values. The Chihuahuan Desert, the eco-region Huiricuta belongs to, is one of the planet's three biologically richest semi-desert areas, covering one-fourth of Mexico.

The Huiricuta natural and cultural reserve, located in the north of the state of San Luis Potosí, is highly representative of Chihuahuan Desert ecosystems. Although it only represents 0.28 percent of the eco-region, it contains about half its species of flora, almost 80 percent of its birds and about 60 percent of its mammals, with a considerable rate

of endemic species. Two things make it even more important: a) it is located in the southeastern part of the eco-region, where there is a high concentration of rare, endemic or endangered cacti, and b) the biogeographical relations of its mountainous part with the Eastern Sierra Madre allows it to include unique habitats and species in the region.

In addition to the Huichol pilgrimage routes and sanctuaries in the reserve and its area of influence, the area boasts important paleontological and archaeological remains, including evidence of the oldest human inhabitants in Mexico (about 31,000 years old).

Feverish mining in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries radically transformed the landscape and caused the extermination of the Guachichil tribes who inhabited the region at the time of the conquest, but it also left its mark in an important number of buildings, haciendas, stone-paved roads and aqueducts. It is in Real de Minas de la Purísima Concepción de los Álamos de los Catorce where this urban-architectural heritage is still the most notable. In addition, the railroad tracks that cross the Huiricuta gave rise to part of what is now our industrial her-



Humberto Fernández Bojór/CHC archive

The members of the ceremonial centers, or *tuquiya*, hold their posts for five years. Their obligations include honoring the ancestors and gods who live in the immense Huichol cultural territory.



Humberto Fernández Bojór/CHC archive

Cave paintings and other archaeological and paleontological finds are part of the Huiricuta heritage, which requires great conservation efforts.

itage, whose value is fortunately beginning to be rediscovered.

There is another unique factor that makes the mixture of natural and cultural values particular to this area even more interesting. The Catholic patron saint of the region, visited in Real de Catorce at the end of large mestizo pilgrimages, is Saint Francis of Assisi, important in the history of Western societies for having broken with Man's utilitarian view of nature.

The Huiricuta reserve is shaped like a polygon and includes the traditional Huichol route. It is the first in Mexico—and perhaps the world—that was created specifically to protect both sacred natural indigenous sites and a cultural itinerary. The main polygon covers 140,000 hectares in the municipalities of Catorce, Villa de Guadalupe, Charcas, Villa de la Paz and Matehuala. The Huichol route is 140 kilometers long from the main polygon to the state of Zacatecas, and crosses the municipalities of Charcas, Salinas de Hidalgo and Villa de Ramos.

Mining was the activity that had the most environmental impact in the region, although it has dwindled down to almost nothing. Today, entrepreneurs intend to reinitiate the exploitation of the area's mineral wealth in open-pit mines, which would be a considerable threat to ecological conservation and would particularly affect the nesting sites of the golden eagle. However, the main threat to the reserve is

overgrazing of goats and, to a lesser extent, encroaching agriculture which splits up the natural habitats.

Also, for several decades, the region has seen a notable increase in Mexican and foreign visitors who come seeking mystical or psychedelic experiences. This disorderly tourism, mainly of "new-agers" and "neo-hippies," has the additional impact of profaning the Huichol sanctuaries and the pillage of peyote, among other cacti, from the towns.

The reserve, decreed in 1994 on the initiative of traditional Huichol authorities and a group of citizens, is under the aegis of the government of San Luis Potosí. However, the significant actions to guarantee its functioning have been promoted by Conservación Humana, A.C., a non-governmental organization. Much is left to do to ensure that the reserve fulfills its objectives of protecting the sacred landscape and its natural and cultural heritage and improving local inhabitants' quality of life. This effort requires a great deal of political will, public participation and, above all, tolerance. ■■■

NOTES

¹ The *agrito* bush is endemic to the Chihuahuan Desert region. Its scientific name is *Berberis trifoliata*, and it has medicinal properties. The Huichols extract a yellow ink from its roots that they use to anoint themselves during their rituals.

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