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# OUR ROOTS REMAIN DISCUSSION GUIDE

A FILM BY IVONNE SERNA & SÉLIM BENZEGHIA



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We extend our deepest gratitude to **The Redford Center** and the **Helen Gurley Brown Foundation** for making this film and discussion guide possible.

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## **GUIDE WRITER:**

ECOS Studio, Ivonne Serna, Sélim Benzeghia

With additional contributions from:

Susana Landin Pedroza, Genoveva Pedroza Ramirez, Francisco Sánchez Macías, Yulitza Janeth Velazquez Macias

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ECOS Studio

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## **ILLUSTRATIONS:**

Giovanni Fabián Guerrero  
Grupo Comex, S.A. de C.V.  
Fabian Gutierrez Roviroso  
Marco Hugo Guardian Lemus

## **IN COLLABORATION WITH:**

Council Of Elders Of Cherán K'eri  
Council Of Communal Lands Of Cherán K'erl



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



**The story you are about to learn belongs to the P'urhépecha people, one of the enduring Indigenous nations in Mexico.** The P'urhépecha have a history spanning over 1,000 years before the Spanish conquest, existing alongside other Mesoamerican civilizations like the Olmec, Maya, and Aztec. Unlike many others, the P'urhépecha were never conquered by the Aztecs, known for their resilience and strength. The name P'urhépecha means "the people."

The P'urhépecha flag represents different parts of their territory: Purple symbolizes the Zacapu Marshlands. Blue represents the lake region, once the heart of the P'urhépecha Empire. Yellow stands for the fertile canyon lands nourished by the Duero River. Green signifies the plateau region, rich in forests and communal lands. At the center of the flag is an obsidian block, symbolizing *Curicaueri*, the deity of Fire, whose power unites the P'urhépecha people. At the center, we have the phrase "Juchari Uinapekua," meaning "our strength." Today, approximately 200,000 P'urhépecha live in Mexico, with their community centered in the P'urhépecha Plateau. Cherán, also known as Cherán K'eri, meaning "big Cherán," is one of the key areas. The name Cherán itself means "place of fear" in the P'urhépecha language. This town, home to around 20,000 P'urhépecha, is a vital center of their culture and self-governance and is where our story is located.

# USING THIS GUIDE

**This guide provides resources to help facilitate discussions about “Our Roots Remain.” The film explores the story of Cherán, a P’urhépecha indigenous town in Mexico, and its efforts to achieve autonomy and protect its environment.**

The resources in this guide have been assembled to help you engage in conversations that connect students, educators, community members, and environmental advocates. Typically, you’ll only need a couple of prompts to get a discussion started. Some of the guide’s suggestions will meet your specific needs, while others are best suited for different situations. Anything that helps your group think more deeply about the issues in the film is a good choice.

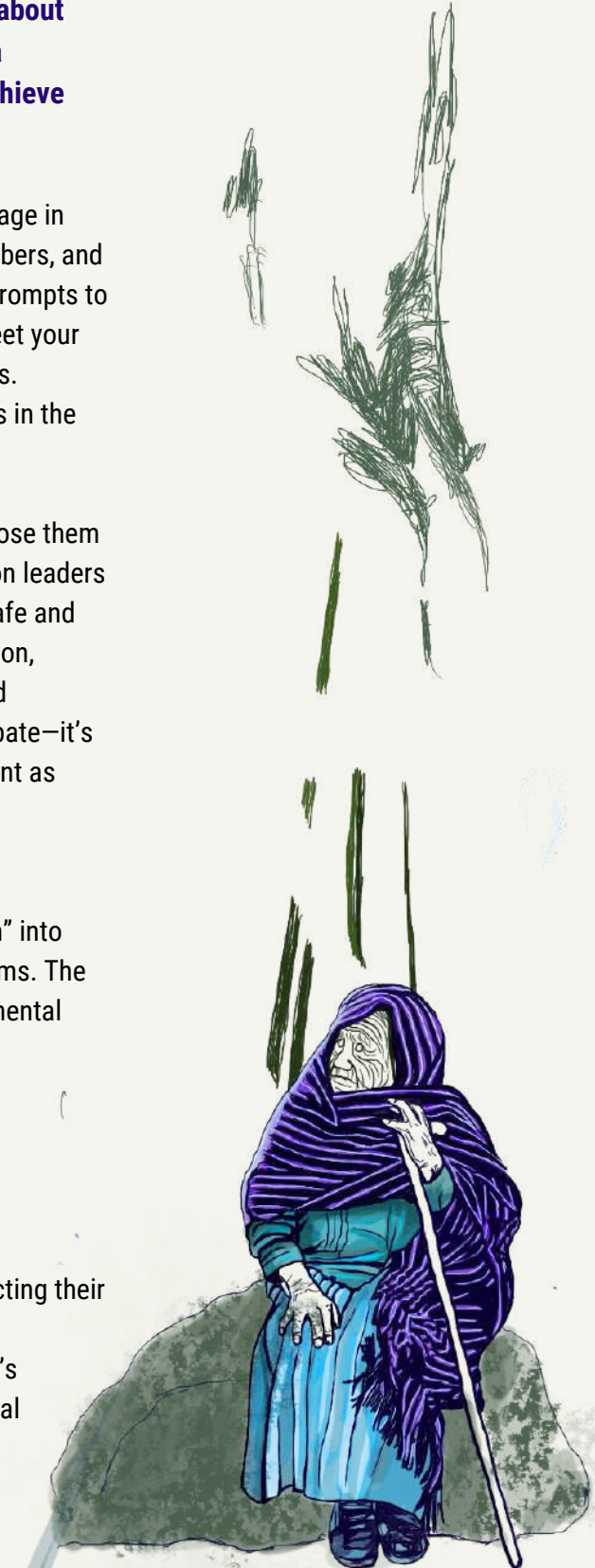
As the film illustrates, what empowers communities can also expose them to risks and challenges. That’s why we recommend that discussion leaders take a look at our facilitation tips for suggestions on creating a safe and respectful space for dialogue. To get the most from your discussion, ensure that everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences. Remind participants that this is a dialogue, not a debate—it’s about learning from each other. Active listening is just as important as contributing your own views.

## **Educational Context:**

This guide is particularly useful for integrating “The Roots Remain” into educational settings, such as university and high school classrooms. The film can enhance students’ understanding of indigenous environmental movements, community-based climate solutions, and the broader implications of local action on global environmental issues.

## **Facilitation Tips:**

- Begin by providing a brief overview of Cherán’s history and the significance of its struggle against illegal logging. Highlight the community’s successful efforts in achieving autonomy and protecting their environment.
- Use questions that encourage participants to reflect on the film’s themes, such as the role of indigenous knowledge in environmental conservation or the impact of community-driven governance.





# A LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKERS

Dear Viewer,

In making this film, our intention was to document and share a story that challenges the way we think about power, resilience, and the environment. Cherán is a living example of what happens when a community refuses to surrender to exploitation and instead, takes control of its own destiny. Our goal was not to romanticize Cherán's struggle but to present it as it is—complex, difficult, and deeply rooted in a sense of responsibility to future generations. There's so much more to Cherán's story than we could fit into this film. So many voices, perspectives, and histories that deserve to be heard. What we've captured here is just the beginning—a starting point for deeper conversations about Indigenous-led solutions, self-governance, and environmental justice.

As you engage with these stories, we ask that you do so with the respect they deserve. These are not just tales of struggle; they are lived experiences, grounded in a deep connection to land and community. We hope this film challenges you, informs you, and inspires you to consider the complexities of the fight for autonomy and climate justice. We're eager to see how this film resonates with you, how it challenges perceptions, and how it contributes to the broader dialogue on these critical issues. And we're excited to see what comes next, both for Cherán and for the ongoing global fight for a sustainable future.

With respect and solidarity,

*Yvonne Serna*

*Sélin Berzeghia*

**Note to facilitators:** Reading this letter aloud or sharing it with your group can serve as an effective way to start a post-film discussion.

## FILM SUMMARY

"Our Roots Remain" captures the compelling story of Cherán, a P'urhépecha indigenous town in Mexico, rising against illegal logging to achieve self-determination and environmental revival. Amidst the global climate crisis, the film highlights the town's path to autonomy as a model for sustainable living. It weaves together the experiences of three central figures – Susy, a young street artist inspired by the town's history; Paco, an environmental engineer contributing to its restoration; and Geno, a leader of the rebellion – illustrating an intergenerational journey of hope, resilience, and ecological guardianship. The documentary showcases Cherán's enduring legacy, the challenges it faces, and its role as a beacon for community-driven environmental action.

# THE STORY OF CHERÁN

## BACKGROUND

Cherán, a P'urhépecha indigenous town in Michoacán, Mexico, has emerged as a unique model of environmental revolt and community resilience. In 2011, faced with rampant deforestation driven by the lucrative avocado industry, the townspeople, led by women, staged a successful rebellion against illegal logging and avocado cultivation. They ousted corrupt officials and local cartels, and declared independence from the Mexican state. In this eco-revolution, Cherán restructured its governance by banning political parties, forming its own council, and implementing strict environmental policies. This included a robust reforestation campaign to rejuvenate native pine forests and advanced water management programs. Cherán's transformation from a victim of ecological exploitation to an autonomous zone of militant environmentalism, standing as a "forest island" amidst avocado plantations, offers vital insights into grassroots environmental activism and the potential of local communities to drive sustainable change. This remarkable story of Cherán underscores the power of local agency and community-led resource governance in combatting environmental degradation and advocating for sustainable development.

## RESISTANCE

Since 2011, Cherán has become a model of grassroots environmentalism and Indigenous resilience. The community reinstated traditional governance, established the Council for Communal Goods to manage natural resources, and implemented strict policies against commercial avocado cultivation. Key initiatives include community-led patrols, sustainable enterprises, and reforestation nearly 3,000 hectares. Cherán's approach, rooted in local collective action and sustainable management, exemplifies how communities can effectively combat environmental challenges and assert their autonomy.



[Giovanni Fabián Guerrero, 2024]

# PEOPLE APPEARING IN OUR ROOTS REMAIN

These key participants are featured in Our Roots Remain. The broader Cherán community was also involved. This list can serve as a reference so that during the discussion you refer to people by name. A full list of other collaborators is included at the end of this guide.



**GENO (she/her):** Genoveva Pedroza Ramírez was a key leader in the 2011 rebellion against illegal logging and a member of Cherán's first Indigenous council. Geno was one of the leads of the Council of the Commons and played an active role in the rebellion. She has been instrumental in establishing Cherán's autonomous governance. Geno is also the aunt of Susy Landin.



**SUSY (she/her):** Susana Landin Pedroza is a young street artist who loves to paint and is training to become a forest guard. Susy was a baby when the revolution started, and she is deeply connected to Cherán's ongoing efforts to protect their land. As Geno's niece, she is inspired by her family's legacy of resistance and is preparing to take on her own role in preserving Cherán's forests.



**PACO (he/him):** An environmental engineer who works for Cherán's Council of the Commons. Paco manages Cherán's community enterprises, including a communal sawmill, a tree nursery for reforestation, a stone mine, and the largest rainwater harvesting system in Latin America. These enterprises aim to balance the community's economic needs with environmental sustainability. Paco was in high school when the revolution started, left town to study, and then returned to work for his community.



**THE FOREST WATCH:** Established in 2011, the Forest Watch is a volunteer citizen patrol responsible for monitoring and protecting Cherán's forest resources. This team typically consists of about four people who are randomly selected to serve for a few months. Their duties include confiscating the tools and machines of illegal loggers. To prevent favoritism and corruption, members rotate regularly after their term of service. The Forest Watch is a crucial part of Cherán's strategy to ensure sustainable management of their natural resources.



# BEYOND THE FILM

## KEY FACTS AND INSIGHTS

### Location and Significance

Cherán, located in the P'urhépecha Plateau of Michoacán, Mexico, is the largest Indigenous community in the region, covering 221.88 square kilometers with a population of over 18,000. The area is vital for aquifer recharge and water catchment, supporting local agriculture and broader ecological health. Cherán is known for its extensive pine and oak forests, which make up 62% of its territory and play a crucial role in the community's economy and environmental sustainability.



### Forest Wealth and Livelihoods

Cherán's forests, primarily pine, oak, and oyamel fir, are central to the community's livelihood. Locals rely on these forests for wood, resin, and edible mushrooms, which are essential for daily life and traditional practices. The community's land use reflects this reliance: 62.01% of Cherán's territory is covered by forests, while 32.9% is dedicated to agriculture, 2.38% to grasslands, and 2.45% to urban areas.

### Environmental Crisis and the Impact of Organized Crime

Beginning in 2008, Cherán faced severe threats from increased violence and insecurity driven by organized crime and corrupt authorities, which resulted in illegal logging and the expansion of avocado plantations. The situation was exacerbated by the influence of drug cartels, who diversified their income sources to include illegal timber extraction, which became a significant problem in Cherán. During the period from 2006 to 2012, Cherán lost 71% of its forest, amounting to 9,000 hectares, primarily due to oak logging. The deforestation intensified between 2010 and 2011, with 2,815 hectares of forest lost, including areas near the urban core. The expansion of the avocado industry further strained the environment, as the water-intensive crop drove cartels to clear forests for new plantations, leading to widespread ecological damage. By 2011, 80% of Cherán's 20,000 hectares of forest had been logged, with 20% of that area burned.



## The Birth of the Movement: April 15, 2011

On April 15, 2011, Cherán's autonomy movement began when local women confronted illegal loggers at the La Cofradía spring, a vital water source for the town and 40 nearby municipalities. Armed with basic tools, they blocked the road, took five loggers hostage, and called the community to action. Hundreds joined, leading to a standoff with municipal police and armed loggers linked to organized crime. In response, the community established "fogatas" (bonfires) as defense points, which became organizing hubs. These actions reactivated neighborhood assemblies, leading to the expulsion of the municipal government and the establishment of a self-governance system. This system began with the election of four representatives from each neighborhood, expanding to 16 commissions overseeing various aspects of community life. The events of that day marked the start of Cherán's resistance against environmental exploitation, which had already led to the loss of 71% of its forests due to illegal logging.

Since 2011, Cherán has maintained this unique system of self-governance that blends Indigenous traditions with modern structures. The community is divided into four neighborhoods—Karhákuva, Jarhukutini, Ketsikua, and Paríkutini—each crucial in local decision-making. Decisions originate in the "fogatas," or citizen groups, which feed into neighborhood assemblies and then the General Council. The electoral process involves public support demonstrations, ensuring equal representation from each neighborhood. The Elders Council, comprising 12 elders, oversees the municipal budget and supervises the work of eight operational councils responsible for various aspects of community life. Regular bi-weekly general assemblies allow for ongoing community feedback and participation. This governance model helps Cherán maintain autonomy, address local needs, and engage with state and federal authorities, while also reviving traditional practices like rotating leadership roles and communal work (tequio).





## Scaling Climate Resilience: Post-2011 Implemented Solutions



### COUNCIL FOR COMMUNAL GOODS

The CCG is responsible for managing the community's natural resources, including issuing permits for tree cutting and overseeing the Forest Watch, which protects against illegal activities. The council also manages community enterprises related to sustainable forest management. By centralizing decision-making on land use and resource management, the CCG provides a practical framework for environmental recovery and sustainable development, rooted in Indigenous governance



### FOREST WATCH

Cherán's Forest Watch, consisting of about 96 rangers, operates around the clock to protect the community's forests. They prevent wildfires, manage soil conservation, and enforce environmental regulations, including the 2019 ban on commercial avocado farming. These patrols also monitor vehicle entry and exit, ensuring sustainable resource management and safeguarding Cherán's autonomy.



### COMMUNITY ENTERPRISES

Cherán's community enterprises, rooted in the social solidarity economy, operate as worker-based organizations without traditional ownership. Key enterprises include a communal sawmill, a tree nursery for reforestation, a stone mine, and the largest rainwater harvesting system in Latin America. These initiatives aim to balance the community's economic needs with environmental sustainability. Projects are required to be sustainable, ensuring long-term ecological health.



### EDUCATION AND CULTURE

Cherán promotes environmental stewardship through education and cultural initiatives. The youth-run radio station "Radio Fogata" spreads the community's message, while festivals celebrate mushrooms, medicinal herbs, and non-GMO seeds. Environmental literacy is prioritized in schools, with students participating in field visits to community enterprises like the sawmill, tree nursery, and rainwater harvesting system.

# DISCUSSION PROMPTS



**Note:** The story of Cherán in *The Roots Remain* can evoke strong emotions and complex discussions about historical and ongoing struggles. Consider having information on local Indigenous organizations or environmental advocacy groups available for participants who want to learn more or take action.

## OPENING QUESTIONS

1. **In one word or phrase, how did this film impact you?** (A quick way to gauge initial reactions and set the tone for the discussion).
2. **What scene or moment in the film resonated with you the most, and why?** (Discuss what made that particular part of the film stand out for you).
3. **If you could ask one of the people featured in the film a question, who would it be and what would you ask?**(Consider what you're curious about and why it matters to you).
4. **How does Cherán's fight for their environment and autonomy shape your views on community action and Indigenous rights?** (Reflect on how the film's themes relate to broader societal issues and your own perspective).
5. **What lessons from Cherán's approach to environmental and cultural preservation could be applied in your community?** (Explore how their strategies for defending their land and culture might inspire local initiatives where you live).



## COMMUNITY-LED GOVERNANCE

1. **What do you think are the key factors that enabled Cherán to successfully establish and maintain their system of self-governance?** (Discuss the challenges and successes of their autonomous governance model.)
2. **How does Cherán's rejection of traditional political parties influence your views on political participation and local governance?** (Consider the implications of their approach for other communities.)

## YOUTH AND INTERGENERATIONAL LEADERSHIP

1. **What role do you see the younger generation, represented by Susy, playing in the future of Cherán's environmental and cultural preservation efforts?** (Explore the significance of youth involvement in sustaining the community's legacy).
2. **How does the intergenerational leadership in Cherán, as depicted in the film, influence your understanding of leadership in social movements?** (Consider how the collaboration between different generations strengthens their movement).

## CULTURAL PRESERVATION

1. **How does the community's deep connection to their land influence their approach to environmental and cultural preservation?** (Reflect on how their connection to the land shapes their efforts to preserve both culture and environment).
2. **What role does art and storytelling play in preserving and transmitting cultural values in Cherán, as seen through Susy's character?** (Consider the impact of cultural expression on community resilience).

## ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

1. **Cherán's reforestation efforts were a central part of their environmental strategy. How do you think this approach could be adapted to other regions facing deforestation?** (Explore the potential for applying Cherán's environmental practices in different contexts).
2. **What does the film teach us about the relationship between Indigenous knowledge and environmental conservation?** (Discuss the importance of traditional knowledge in modern environmental practices).



# CLOSING QUESTIONS

*These prompts are designed to help synthesize the discussion and transition into action planning. Take a pen and fill in your thoughts as you reflect on the film and the conversation.*

What's one thing you learned from The Roots Remain that you wish everyone knew? What do you think would change if everyone understood this?

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If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What do you hope their main takeaway would be?

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I am inspired by this film (or discussion) to:

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This film is important because:

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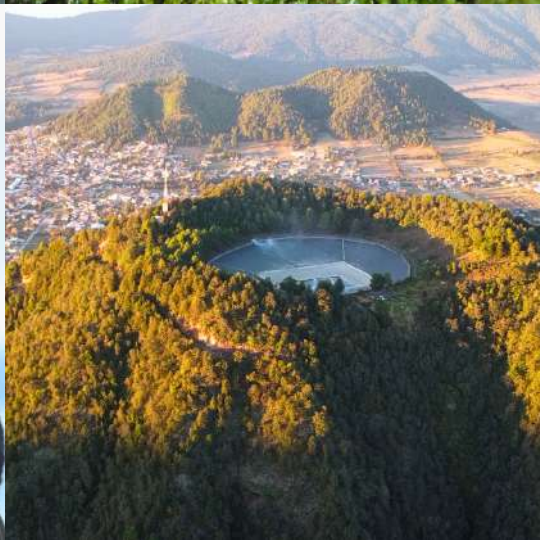
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# THE VOICES OF CHERÁN

## WHAT THEY WANT YOU TO REMEMBER

### PACO, ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEER

“What I hope people take away from this documentary is that circumstances change over time. We’re not in the same situation as we were in 2011—some problems have been resolved, others remain, and some have grown worse. Even though the conditions are different, we’re still fighting to keep the project we started in 2011 alive. Our community, despite all the ups and downs, still holds on to the ideal of preserving the resources our ancestors left us. It’s up to us to protect them for those who haven’t been born yet. There are things more valuable than money, and they’re right in front of us—we see them every day when we step outside our homes. We are only temporary caretakers of the place we live in, and that’s why we must give our best and leave a legacy”.



### SUSY, STREET ARTIST

“I want everyone, young and old, but especially the young, to learn and understand the immense value of our Mother Earth, Nana Echeri, because we are completely dependent on her. We need to find balance—give in order to receive. What do I mean by this? I’m talking about not exploiting our forests, not engaging in excessive logging. The forest is generous; it gives us so much, like mushrooms, firewood, fertilizer, nutrients, resin, and many other things. In return, Nana Echeri only asks that we respect her, conserve her, help with fires, and stop polluting the water and the forests.”



[Giovanni Fabián Guerrero, 2024]



### GENO, COMMUNITY LEADER

“What Cherán has accomplished in defending the forests is about safeguarding life itself, it’s something my father instilled in us from a young age. He taught us that if you plant a tree, you must take care of it, because a tree is more than just a plant—it’s the foundation of an entire ecosystem. Beneath each tree lies a world of life, from the mushrooms we gather during the rainy season to the water that sustains us all.

Our movement reinforced these values, showing us that when we lose trees, we lose much more—our water, our resources, and our future. That’s why it’s so important not just to avoid littering or using plastic, but to prevent waste from the start. Recycling is necessary, but even that uses resources we could save by being more mindful.

The message from Cherán is clear: what we protect here isn’t just for us, it’s for the benefit of everyone. We all breathe the same air, we all drink the same water. The responsibility to care for our environment is something we all share, and it starts with simple actions—like planting a tree and taking care of it every day.”



# TAKING ACTION

After watching “Our Roots Remain,” consider how you can respond to the powerful call to action that Cherán’s story presents. The film highlights the importance of indigenous-led environmental stewardship and the ongoing fight for autonomy. Reflecting on this, here are some ways you can take meaningful action in your own community:

## 1

### **Deepen Your Understanding of Indigenous Histories and Rights**

Begin by educating yourself about the history and current realities of Indigenous communities in your area. Reflect on how your own experiences are connected to their struggles and how you can stand in solidarity rather than simply offering support from a distance. Prioritize listening to Indigenous voices and learning from their perspectives. Attend events, read Indigenous authors, and engage with Indigenous-led media to deepen your understanding of their issues and aspirations

## 2

### **Support Indigenous-Led Initiatives**

Support Indigenous-led projects by offering your time, skills, or financial resources in areas like environmental conservation, cultural preservation, or education. For example, you could volunteer your expertise in social media to help amplify an Indigenous organization's message, donate to community-driven initiatives, or participate in local Indigenous events and cultural activities. Always follow the community's lead, ensuring your contributions align with their needs and priorities, rather than imposing your own ideas or agenda. The goal is to support their vision and empower their efforts.

## 3

### **Advocate for Indigenous Rights and Environmental Protection**

Advocate for Indigenous rights by promoting reconciliation, respecting their land, culture, and self-determination, and addressing past injustices through dialogue and action. Support efforts to prevent environmental harm in Indigenous territories, amplify Indigenous voices, and ensure they lead conversations about their own rights. Push for Indigenous representation in decision-making processes at all levels, including government and environmental organizations.

## 4

### **Ongoing Solidarity and Community Engagement**

Solidarity is an ongoing commitment. Continue supporting Indigenous struggles by staying informed and involved. Educate your community through activities like screening *Our Roots Remain*, starting a book club on Indigenous authors, or organizing film viewings that highlight Indigenous issues. These actions foster meaningful conversations, encourage action, and support Indigenous-led initiatives.



# RESOURCES

## AND MORE INFORMATION

Below are select resources available in Mexico and internationally. These are a starting point for your research; you should explore additional resources relevant to your own region and country.

### MEDIA INITIATIVES AND MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

- **The Redford Center:** Supports storytelling for environmental justice and Indigenous rights. This project was funded by The Redford Center. [The Redford Center](#)
- **Indigenous Media Foundation:** Empowers Indigenous communities to share their stories globally through media. [Indigenous Media Foundation](#)
- **ImagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival:** The largest Indigenous film and media arts festival, promoting Indigenous cultural expression and activism. [ImagineNATIVE](#)

### ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

- **Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN):** Addresses environmental and economic justice issues, protecting Indigenous lands and fostering sustainable communities. [IEN](#)
- **Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA) (MX):** Provides legal support to Indigenous communities defending their environmental rights. [CEMDA](#)
- **Forest Peoples Programme:** Supports Indigenous forest communities worldwide in securing their land rights and advocating for self-determination. [Forest Peoples Programme](#)
- **Global Witness:** Investigates and campaigns against environmental and human rights abuses, focusing on protecting Indigenous land defenders. [Global Witness](#)

### SUPPORT AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

- **Red de Jóvenes Indígenas (MX):** A network of Indigenous youth in Mexico promoting Indigenous rights, autonomy, and cultural heritage. [Red de Jóvenes Indígenas](#)
- **International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA):** Promotes and defends Indigenous peoples' rights globally, focusing on autonomy and self-determination. [IWGIA](#)

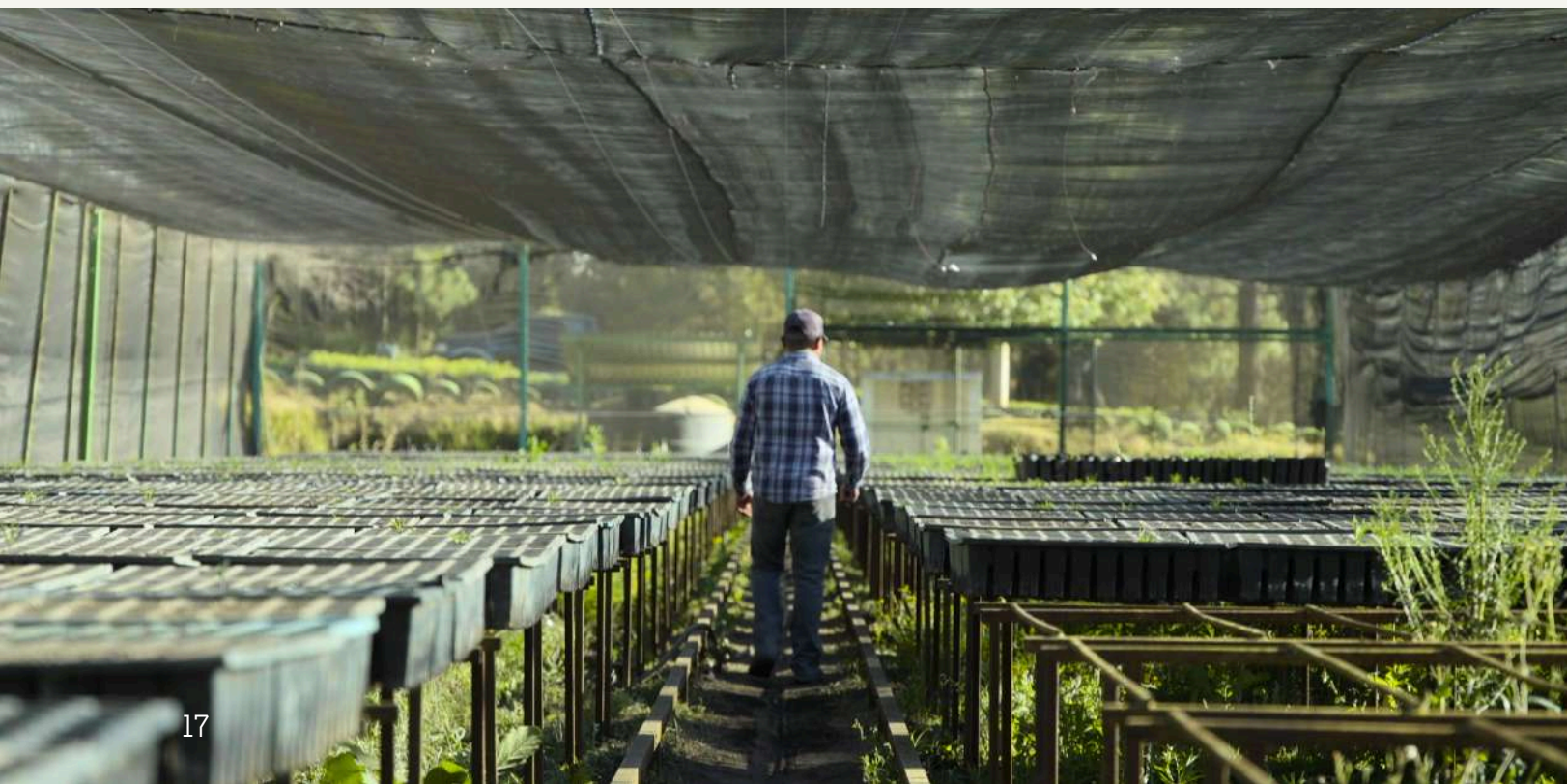
## PUBLICATIONS

- **Conociendo y Reconociendo Nuestro Territorio Cherán K'eri (2013):** A book resulting from collaborative work with Cherán's youth, documenting their experiences and contributions to Indigenous autonomy and environmental stewardship.  
Available at: <https://issuu.com/eca.org.mx/docs/web>

## SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES IN CHERÁN

- **Espacio para la Cultura Ambiental, ECA A.C.:** Supports environmental education and sustainability initiatives in Michoacán, including environmental literacy and sustainable agriculture programs.
- **Red de Etnoecología y Patrimonio Biocultural:** Promotes the conservation of biocultural heritage in Mexico, focusing on Indigenous knowledge and environmental sustainability.
- **Grupo Interdisciplinario de Tecnología Rural Apropiable, GIRA A.C.:** Works on sustainable rural development projects in Mexico, supporting community-driven environmental protection and empowerment.
- **Instituto Tecnológico Superior P'urhépecha:** An educational institution that promotes higher education for the P'urhépecha community, focusing on cultural preservation and technological advancement.

**You can support the community of Cherán directly** through the Consejo de Bienes Comunales by contacting them at [consejobienescheran@gmail.com](mailto:consejobienescheran@gmail.com)



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