

# Amazon Tribe Creates 500-Page Remarkable Natural Medicine Encyclopedia

By Jeremy Hance | [Mongabay](#)



In one of the great tragedies of our age, indigenous traditions, stories, cultures and knowledge are winking out across the world. Whole languages and mythologies are vanishing, and in some cases even entire indigenous groups are falling into extinction. This is what makes the news that a tribe in the Amazon—the Matsés peoples of Brazil and Peru—have created a 500-page encyclopedia of their traditional medicine all the more remarkable. The encyclopedia, compiled by five shamans with assistance from conservation group Acaté, details every plant used by Matsés medicine to cure a massive variety

of ailments.

“The [Matsés Traditional Medicine Encyclopedia] marks the first time shamans of an Amazonian tribe have created a full and complete transcription of their medicinal knowledge written in their own language and words,” Christopher Herndon, president and co-founder of Acaté, told Mongabay in an interview (in full below).

The Matsés have only printed their encyclopedia in their native language to ensure that the medicinal knowledge is not stolen by corporations or researchers as has happened in the past. Instead, the encyclopedia is meant as a guide for training new, young shamans in the tradition and recording the living shamans’ knowledge before they pass.

“One of the most renowned elder Matsés healers died before his knowledge could be passed on so the time was now. Acaté and the Matsés leadership decided to prioritize the Encyclopedia before more of the elders were lost and their ancestral knowledge taken with them,” said Herndon.

Acaté has also started a program connecting the remaining Matsés shamans with young students. Through this mentorship program, the indigenous people hope to preserve their way of life as they have for centuries past.

“With the medicinal plant knowledge disappearing fast among most indigenous groups and no one to write it down, the true losers in the end are tragically the indigenous stakeholders themselves,” said Herndon. “The methodology developed by the Matsés and Acaté can be a template for other indigenous cultures to safeguard their ancestral knowledge.”

**[Learn 5 spiritual benefits of Ayahuasca – a shamanic medicine originating from the Amazon Rainforest. Ayahuasca has a powerful effect on one’s spiritual processes and can facilitate healing, awakening, understanding and the development of spiritual wisdom when used in conjunction with](#)**

## spiritual practice and a strong healthy life.

### AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER HERNDON, M.D.

**Mongabay:** *Why is this encyclopedia important?*

**Christopher Herndon:** The encyclopedia marks the first time shamans of an Amazonian tribe have created a full and complete transcription of their medicinal knowledge written in their own language and words. Over the centuries, Amazonian peoples have passed on through oral tradition an accumulated wealth of knowledge and techniques of treatment that are a product of their deep spiritual and physical ties to the natural world. The Matsés live in one of the most biodiverse ecosystems on the planet and have mastered knowledge of the healing properties of its plants and animals. Yet, in a world in which cultural change is destabilizing even the most isolated societies, this knowledge is rapidly disappearing. It is hard to overstate just how quickly this knowledge can be lost after a tribe makes contact with the outside world. Once extinguished, this knowledge, along with the tribe's self-sufficiency, can never fully be reclaimed. Historically, what has followed the loss of endemic health systems in many indigenous groups is near total dependency on the rudimentary and extremely limited external health care that is available in such remote and difficult-to-access locations. Not surprisingly, in most countries, indigenous groups have the highest rates of mortality and disease.

The initiative is important from the Matsés perspective because loss of culture and poor health care are among their greatest concerns. The methodology they pioneered to successfully protect and safeguard their own knowledge can serve as a replicable model for other indigenous communities facing similar cultural erosion. For the broader conservation movement, we know that there is a strong correlation between intact ecosystems and regions of indigenous inhabitation, making strengthening of indigenous culture one of the most effective ways to protect large areas of rainforest.

**Mongabay:** *Why is now the time to record this information?*

**Christopher Herndon:** The Matsés knowledge and the accumulated wisdom of generations stood on the very precipice of extinction. Fortunately, there remained a few elder Matsés who

still held the ancestral knowledge as sustained contact with the outside world only occurred within the past half century. The healers were adults at the time of initial contact and had already mastered their skills before being told they were useless by missionaries and government workers. At the time we started the project, none of the elder shamans had younger Matsés interested in learning from them. One of the most renowned elder Matsés healers died before his knowledge could be passed on so the time was now. Acaté and the Matsés leadership decided to prioritize the Encyclopedia before more of the elders were lost and their ancestral knowledge taken with them. The project was not about saving a traditional dance or costume, it was about their health and that of future generations of Matsés. The stakes could not be higher.

**One of the earliest interpretations for the term shaman is “one who heals the sick and honors the forest.” In addition to their obligations as tribal healers and the keepers of the ancient ways, the shaman also leads the conservation effort in their tribe or community. They take responsibility for the protection of the forest, the ecosystem that supports the sacred plants.**

**Mongabay:** *What is the encyclopedia like?*

**Christopher Herndon:** After two years of intense work by the Matsés, the Encyclopedia now includes chapters by five Matsés master healers and is over 500 pages long! Each entry is categorized by disease name, with explanation of how to recognize it by symptoms; its cause; which plants to use; how to prepare the medicine and alternative therapeutic options. A photograph taken by the Matsés of each plant accompanies each entry in the encyclopedia.

The Encyclopedia is written by and from the worldview of the Matsés shaman, describing how rainforest animals are involved in the natural history of the plants and connected with diseases. It is a true shamanic encyclopedia, fully written and edited by indigenous shamans, the first to our knowledge of its kind and scope.

[Read the rest of the article...](#)