

QOTZUNI

PEOPLE OF THE LAKE

OVERVIEW

Qotzuñi: People of the Lake is an **Oscar-qualified** documentary short film produced in collaboration with **Uru Indigenous Nation of Bolivia**. The community lived off the waters of Lake Poopó—the country's second-largest lake—for centuries, until mining operations diverted and contaminated its headwaters and intense drought struck the region, causing the lake to disappear completely. As a fishing and hunting community, the Urus have lost their sole source of food and livelihood.

The film portrays the community's struggles to adapt to this loss, as well as the cultural challenge of **retaining the identity** of "Qotzuñi," or "People of the Lake," when the lake itself ceases to exist. It is accompanied by an impact project that aims to **transfer the documentary's success into material change on the ground** and spread the universal message that we are all people of the same lake. The project also includes an internationally-exhibited photographic series and academic research.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

We, Gastón Zilberman and Michael Salama, are the filmmaking team behind **Qotzuñi: People of the Lake**. We arrived in the altiplano to conduct research about the effects of mining on rural and indigenous communities in Bolivia, and first came into contact with the Uru authorities through two local advocacy groups devoted to environmental justice and combating illegal mining operations: *Fundación Pueblos de Montaña* and *Centro de Ecología y Pueblos Andinos*. After meeting with the Uru authorities, we determined together that a documentary film would be the best way to **communicate the story to a global audience** and, hopefully, **attract aid from the international community**. Every stage of the filmmaking process has been carried out in explicit collaboration with the community and guided by **Florencio Inocente Aguilar**, an Uru authority and Qotzuñi's associate producer.



LOCAL IMPACT

The project aims to invest **\$100,000** in on-the-ground initiatives. Impact goals and stages were strategically **designed by the Uru community leaders** together with local organizations. We have completed 25% of the project and will continue **through 2026**.

Sustainable Economic Development • Food Security
Cultural Resilience • Local Activism • Ecological Restoration

COMPLETED STAGES

Stage 1: School Supplies

Donated school supplies to the **Uru Educational Cooperative in Puñaca Tinta María**, as well as to children from the most economically vulnerable Uru families.



Puñaca Tinta María | February - March 2025

Stage 2: Family Businesses & Food Security

Provided immediate food assistance and addressed **long-term economic independence** by supporting family businesses: a salt production facility, natural medicine, and local artisans.



Puñaca Tinta María | June - August 2025

Stage 3: Artisan Organization Support & Food Security

Expanded the initiatives of Stage 2 into the remaining Uru communities of Vilañeque and Llapallapani, with a **focus on artisanship and immediate food security**.



Vilañeque & Llapallapani | September 2025

UPCOMING STAGES

Stage 4: Community Grants

Establish grants to fund Uru community members to **design and execute local projects** relating to food security, ecological protection, language, art, or other proposed initiatives.

Stage 5: Food Security Infrastructure

Construction of **greenhouses and raised agricultural beds**. Due to soil contamination and lack of arable land, the Uru communities currently cannot meet their food needs with standard agriculture.

Stage 6: Remediation

Arborization of lakebed's surrounding wetlands for **water retention and quality**. To be carried out in collaboration with the Uru Uru Team.

GLOBAL IMPACT

Festivals & Awards

- **DOC NYC 2024** - Grand Jury Prize
- **DOC NYC 2025** - Short List
- **Jackson Wild 2025** - Finalist & Impact Pitch Grantee
- **Red Nation Film Festival 2025** - Edward Albert Award
- **Santiago Wild 2025** - Winner (Planet in Crisis)
- **Naturvision Film Festival 2024** - Best Short Film
- **INKAFEST Mountain Film Festival 2025** - Best Short Film
- **Oruro Film Festival 2025** - Best Short Film
- **Patagonia Eco Film Festival 2024** - Special Mention
- **Official Selections:** Hamptons International Film Festival, Indy Shorts, DocEdge, St. Louis International Film Festival, Hawaii International Film Festival, Galway Film Fleadh, Climate Film Festival, New York Latino Film Festival, and many more.

65+
screenings in
19 countries

Publications

Qotzuñi has been covered worldwide by Harvard Review of Latin America, Sony World Photography Awards, Photo Vogue, Scientific American, Página12, Infobae, Ámbito, Art & Object, Princeton University History, Earth Partner, El Deber, Sony Alpha, The Contending, and the Pelham Examiner.

Virtual Museum

The Qotzuñi Virtual Museum shares years of **academic research and fieldwork** on an online platform to make the **history, culture and present challenges of the Urus accessible to the world**.

Educational Screenings

Qotzuñi has been acquired by the film archives of **U.C. Berkeley** and **NYU**, and screened in **Columbia University**, **Harvard**, **Torcuato Di Tella**, **California State University** and **Princeton University**.

Community Screenings

The film is screening in communities across the world, with a focus on **North American indigenous groups**, in order to share its approach to **collaborative storytelling**. This work is underway with groups such as the Paiute tribes of California, the Shinnecock of New York, and the Uru communities, and is supported by the 11th Hour Project of the Schmidt Family Foundation.

Photography Contest

Offering **\$1,000** in cash prizes, we have launched a photography contest that calls upon storytellers across the globe to submit photos that speak to Qotzuñi's message: that **we are all people of the same lake**. Juried by Oscar-winner **Kartiki Gonsalves**, Magnum photographer **Eli Reed**, and the Qotzuñi directorial team, this initiative is supported by **Earth Alliance**.

Partnerships



Learn more and contribute at:
QOTZUNIFILM.COM

