

CULTURE

## A Future With Fewer Tongues

Half of languages are dying

By Kent Garber

**L**anguages, like people, are capable of dying—and they do. They lose speakers, fade, slip into silence, or, in rare cases, vanish without warning, consumed by catastrophe. Of the world's roughly 7,000 languages, in fact, more than half are expected to disappear by the end of the century.

A new study by the National Geographic Society shows just how common this phenomenon is. The study, released last week, identified five hot spots with the highest rate of language loss in the world. Two of them are in the United States: the Pacific Northwest and Oklahoma-Southwest.

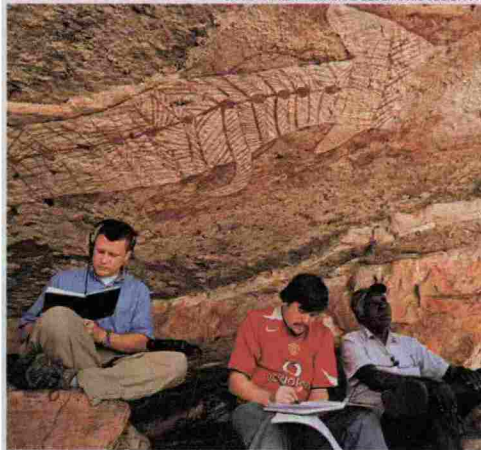
When people think of language death they usually envision distant places: indigenous tribes forsaking their codes to speak the dominant tongue. To a certain extent, the study revealed, that's true. Eastern Siberia, northern Australia, and central South America are all richly diverse, and that diversity is rapidly disappearing.

But it's happening in the United States, too. The victims are American Indian tribal languages, many of which have fewer than 100 speakers. In 2005, researchers

could locate only five fluent speakers of the language of the Yuchi tribe of Oklahoma; all were elderly. In the Pacific Northwest, where more than 50 languages are spoken by at least one person, virtually none are being learned.

Why is language preservation so important? Languages encode information. The Kallawayaya people of Bolivia, for instance, use a secret language to catalog medicinal plants, so the loss of a language can mean a loss of knowledge and culture. At the same time, "English has been greatly enriched by incorporating many aspects of other languages," says Doug Whalen, president of the Endangered Language Fund. From a scientific view, he says, "our understanding of how the brain constructs and orders language has been informed, in many cases, by languages that have very few speakers." For dying languages, the future is often bleak. But there have been successes. Manx, the native language of the Isle of Mann, died out in the 1970s, but today, after a revival movement, there are approximately 2,000 speakers. ●

CHRIS RAINIER—NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY / AP



Linguists with a native speaker on Aboriginal lands

