



Researchers speak out on languages on brink of extinction

By Elizabeth Weise, USA TODAY

A new analysis pinpoints five regions in the world where native languages — each representing millennia of human knowledge — are most in danger of disappearing.

Linguists involved in the research conducted by the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages — a non-profit organization in Salem, Ore. — and National Geographic magazine are calling the crisis a global extinction.

Of the estimated 7,000 languages spoken today, one vanishes every 14 days when its last speaker dies, research shows.

Called hot spots by researchers, the areas most prone to losing their indigenous languages are located along historic migration routes or have been colonized, says Gregory Anderson, director of the institute.

The five hot spots are northern Australia; central South America (Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Brazil and Bolivia); Northwest Pacific plateau (Washington, Oregon and British Columbia); eastern Siberia; and Oklahoma, along with parts of Texas and New Mexico.

In these places, colonial languages such as English, Spanish or Russian are considered more prestigious, researchers say.

Children quickly perceive which language is considered "better," and when they abandon the language, it no longer has a future, Anderson says.

In Oklahoma, for example, Native American languages from indigenous peoples and from tribes moved into the area by the U.S. government are endangered.

The rate of language extinction is increasing, proceeding much faster than that of animal or plant species, says K. David Harrison, co-director of National Geographic's Enduring Voices project and a professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania.

Languages are great sources of information about the world their speakers inhabit. In Brazil, 4,000 people are left who speak Kayapo. Their language distinguishes between 56 types of bees — information that will be lost to biologists if the language dies, Harrison says.

"We're really in a position here of seeing a vast body of knowledge about plant species and ecosystem go," he says.

National Geographic has helped fund the Enduring Voices project, which sends researchers to find and document the last speakers of languages in critical condition.

In some cases, the last available information about the language is 30 to 40 years old, "so just establishing that

there are speakers is a scientific finding," he says. For undocumented languages, just collecting the 100 most-common words is a big step, he says.

"Eighty percent of the world's languages have not been documented, so if they disappeared tomorrow, we wouldn't know anything about them," Anderson says.

Of the 231 languages spoken in Australia, at least 50 have never been written. A July trip by the researchers found and recorded a speaker of Amurdag, a language formerly believed to be extinct.

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