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Half of World's Languages May Become Extinct by 2100

By Crystal Davis on Wednesday, September 19, 2007.

Languages are now becoming extinct faster than birds, mammals, fish or plants. **Of the estimated 7,000 unique languages spoken in the world today, nearly half are likely to disappear this century, with an average of one lost every two weeks.** Losing a language often means losing the knowledge and history of an entire culture, especially when there is no written record available. For this reason, **the National Geographic Society** and the **Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages** have engaged in an impressive undertaking to identify and record the most endangered languages in the world.

Languages Disappearing at an Unprecedented Rate

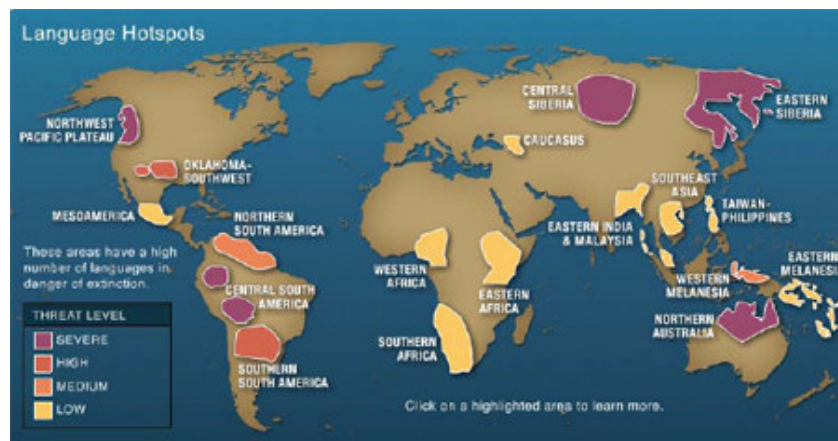
Roughly 80 percent of the global population speaks only one percent of its languages. Dominant and national "official" languages spread through younger generations via school, television and in the marketplace, often pushing the native languages of their parents slowly towards obscurity. Although the rise, fall and mixing of languages has occurred throughout human history, the rate of loss has been accelerated in recent decades by globalization.

The **Enduring Voices Project** aims to document endangered languages and prevent extinction by identifying the world's language "hot spots," regions where languages are disappearing at a rapid pace. The five regions identified thus far include Northern Australia, Central South America, North America's upper Pacific coastal zone, Eastern Siberia, and Oklahoma and Southwest United States. Researchers for the Project travel the world to interview and make recordings of the remaining speakers of an endangered language, including those in Australia, where virtually all of the 231 existing aboriginal languages are threatened. To achieve its goals, the project intends to:

- understand how languages are distributed geographically,
- determine how linguistic diversity is linked to biological diversity, and
- raise global awareness on the problem of language loss.

Explore the World's Language Hotspots

Click the map below to link to an interactive version.



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Source: [Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, 2007](#).

Linking Linguistic Diversity to Biodiversity and Conservation

Languages often hold the only record of a people's history, including their songs, stories, and ancient traditions. In particular, many indigenous cultures contain a wealth of information about the local environment and its floral and faunal resources, based upon thousands of years of close interaction, experience, and problem-solving. With the extinction of a language, therefore, mankind also loses access to local understanding of plants, animals, and ecosystems, some of which have important medicinal value, and many of which remain undocumented by science. Thus, the survival of threatened languages, and the indigenous knowledge contained within, is an important aspect of maintaining biological diversity.

RELATED LINKS:

[List of websites that showcase efforts to revitalize indigenous languages](#)

[CIESIN Thematic Guides: "Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Preserving Biodiversity"](#)

[Convention on Biological Diversity Cross-Cutting Issue: Traditional Knowledge, Innovations and Practices](#)

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