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Languages Racing to Extinction in 5 Global "Hotspots"

Stefan Lovgren for National Geographic News September 18, 2007

From Alaska to Australia, hundreds of languages around the world are teetering on the brink of extinction—some being spoken only by a single person, according to a new study.

The research has revealed five hotspots where languages are vanishing most rapidly: eastern Siberia, northern Australia, central South America, Oklahoma, and the U.S. Pacific Northwest (see map of the hotspots).



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National Geographic Society Enduring Voices Project

"Languages are undergoing a global extinction crisis that greatly exceeds the pace of species extinction," said David Harrison, a linguistics professor at Pennsylvania's Swarthmore College.

Harrison and Gregory Anderson, both affiliated with the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages in Oregon, traveled the world to interview the last speakers of critically endangered languages as part of the National Geographic Society's Enduring Voices Project.

(National Geographic News is a division of the National Geographic Society.)

More than half of the world's 7,000 languages are expected to die out by the end of the century, often taking with them irreplaceable knowledge about the natural world, Harrison said.

"Most of what we know about species and ecosystems is not written down anywhere, it's only in people's heads," he said.

"We are seeing in front of our eyes the erosion of the human knowledge base."

Slow Deaths

In the last 500 years, an estimated half of the world's languages, from Etruscan to Tasmanian, have become extinct.

But researchers say the languages of the world are now vanishing faster than ever in recorded history.

More than 500 languages may be spoken by fewer than ten people.

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Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages

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