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Languages dying out faster than birds

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At least 20 percent of the world's languages are in imminent danger of becoming extinct as their last speakers die off, compared with about 18 percent of mammals, 8 percent of plants and 5 percent of birds.

The extinction of a language translates into a loss of knowledge, said linguist David Harrison, associate director of the Living Tongues Institute and a linguist at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania.

"When we lose a language, we lose centuries of thinking about time, seasons, sea creatures, reindeer, edible flowers, mathematics, landscapes, myths, music, the unknown and the everyday."

Half the world's languages have disappeared in the past 500 years, and half of the remainder are likely to vanish this century, Harrison said.

Harrison and Living Tongues director Gregory Anderson have identified five language "hot spots" where the extinction rate is particularly high, they said at a news conference sponsored by the National Geographic Society, which is supporting their research. One such area encompasses Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico, where 40 languages spoken by American Indians are at risk. Only five elderly members of the Yuchi tribe, for example, are fluent in the Yuchi tongue, which might be unrelated to any other language.

The top hot spot is northern Australia, where 153 aboriginal languages are at risk. There are three known speakers of Magati Ke in the Northern Territory, and three Yawuru speakers.

Other hot spots include central South America, parts of the Pacific Northwest and eastern Siberia. All the areas are similar in that they were successfully colonized with indigenous languages giving way to a colonial language.

Researchers from the Living Tongues Institute are visiting these locales and using digital equipment to record the last speakers of the most endangered tongues. LOS ANGELES TIMES