

Languages aid survival of species

By Nic Fleming, Science Correspondent in San Francisco

Last Updated: 1:16am GMT 19/02/2007

Preserving disappearing languages could help to save threatened animal and plant species, say scientists.

Dr David Harrison, from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, said crucial knowledge from indigenous peoples, which could be used to protect endangered species, is at risk of vanishing for good.

There are nearly 7,000 languages in the world, of which, it is estimated, nearly half may die out by the end of the century.

advertisement Dr Harrison told delegates from the association that irreplaceable knowledge, which has only been passed down orally, could be lost.

He said: "We don't know yet what the answer is to slowing down the extinction of plants and animals, but understanding the knowledge people have of these ecosystems could be key to that."

As an example Dr Harrison described the case of the two-barred flasher (*Astrartes fulgerator*), a group of butterflies previously thought to be one species, which biologists have only just realised are 10 separate species.

This fact, however, was already well-known to the native Mexican tribe, the Tzeltal, who have a well-honed system of identifying which larvae are likely to eat their crops, and when.

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