

Language may aid threatened species

Preserving vanishing languages could help to save threatened species, experts believe.

Sharing the knowledge of indigenous people who live close to nature can open the eyes of scientists, it is claimed.

But for this to happen it is vital to understand their languages and cultural concepts, Dr David Harrison, from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania told a meeting of scientists.

It is estimated that more than half of the world's nearly 7,000 languages are in danger of dying out by the end of the century. As they disappear, irreplaceable knowledge about the world's biodiversity is lost, said Dr Harrison.

"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," he told the American Association for the Advancement of Science in San Francisco.

Biologists were beginning to realise that biodiversity is more wide ranging than was previously assumed, said Dr Harrison. Animals and plants once thought to stand alone often turned out to be several different species - something native peoples understood long before scientists.

The two-barred flasher butterfly, *Astraptese fulgerator*, that lives in central and South America provided a good example, said Dr Harrison.

"Scientists recently discovered that what they thought for over a century was a single species was 10 species," he told the meeting.

The discovery was made when it was realised that the larvae of the different species had different diets. It was a native Mexican tribe, the Tzeltal, who showed researchers the way.

"The Tzeltal care very little about the adult butterfly, but have a very fine-grain classifying system for the larvae which affect their crops and survival," said Dr Harrison.