



Native voices going extinct

A few tongues survive in Canada

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SAN FRANCISCO—Every time a language dies, experts warned here yesterday, the world loses irreplaceable scientific knowledge as well as cultural richness.

The potential toll is immense, with an estimated half of humanity's current 7,000 languages struggling to survive, often spoken by just an elderly few.

A 1996 UN report classed aboriginal languages in Canada as among the most endangered in the world and Statistics Canada concluded that only three out of 50 – Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut – had large enough populations to be considered secure from extinction in the long run.

"The accumulated knowledge is fragile because most of the world's languages have no writing," said linguist David Harrison, director of research with the Living Tongues Institute.

Harrison said that Western biologists are only now beginning to unravel the diversity of plants and species that local inhabitants have long understood and catalogued in their rich vocabulary.

For example, recent research discovered that a butterfly in Costa Rica wasn't one species but 10. Yet the local Tzeltal people had already called the caterpillars by different names, because they attacked different crops.

"The knowledge that science thinks it is discovering about plants, animals and weather cycles has often been around for a long time," said Harrison, a professor at Pennsylvania's Swarthmore College.

"It is out there, it is fragile and it is rapidly eroding," he said.

Yet recent success in reviving several aboriginal tongues is rousing hope that the tide of language extinction is not inevitable, delegates at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science heard. Some examples:

- The language of Miami-Illinois Indians, long classed as extinct, is now spoken daily by at least 50 people after a major "reclamation" effort.
- Languages on the brink of extinction are being recorded for future revival – such as that of the Chulym, a tribe of hunters and fishers in Siberia.
- A master-apprentice program is rejuvenating some of the 50 threatened aboriginal languages in California.
- More than 2,000 schoolchildren are now fluent speakers of Hawaiian, a language banned from schools in Hawaii for almost a century.

"The reason that a lot of indigenous languages went extinct was that they could not be used in school," said William Wilson, a professor of Hawaiian Language and Studies at Hilo, Hawaii.

Despite a policy of official bilingualism, the native Hawaiian language was in its death throes, but that changed dramatically after the state legislature in 1987 scrapped a 90-year-ban on using Hawaiian in the schools. Now, students are taught in their native language from pre-school to college.

Yet Hawaiian-speaking students also study Japanese in the first six grades, Latin in Grades 7 and 8, and English throughout. "We feel children can learn many languages if they have a solid base in English and Hawaiian," the language professor said.

Wilson said in an interview that the architects of language recovery in Hawaii worked closely with aboriginal groups in Canada, including the Squamish in Vancouver and the Six Nations at Brantford. The Hawaiian group also produced a multilingual book in co-operation with the Inuit.

The preservation of aboriginal languages in Canada was dealt a major blow last year when the Harper government scrapped a 10-year, \$173 million language revitalization program.

Yet Miami tribe member Daryl Baldwin told a news conference that even a supposedly extinct aboriginal language can be brought back to life. That's what happened with the Miami language previously spoken over a wide region of the lower Great Lakes.

At Miami University in Ohio, Baldwin and colleagues pored over written records to help interested tribe members again speak the language.

And the language is kept up to date, he said. In Miami, the word for a computer translates as "the thing that thinks fast."

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