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Five-Year Project Aims to Catalog Endangered Languages

By Paul Sisco
Washington
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While there are nearly 7,000 languages, only 83 are used by a majority of the world's population. Researchers say many of the rest are in danger of disappearing, warning that perhaps half the world's native languages will no longer exist by the end of the century. David Harrison with the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages says language extinction is a crisis of unprecedented proportions and he is trying to do something about it. VOA's Paul Sisco has more.



David Harrison is a professor and field linguist. With recording equipment, pen and logbook he travels to remote parts of the world to collecting and preserving native languages on the verge of extinction.

"I work with the last speakers of endangered languages, and so when I sit down with an elder in Northern Australia or India or Siberia I'm very aware of the recording we're making," Harrison said. "In some cases it's the first recording ever made of the language, and so I worry a lot about sound quality. In other cases it may be the last recording that we'll ever have an opportunity to make."

David Harrison

It is all part of the Enduring Voices project supported by National Geographic and Harrison's non-profit [Living Tongues Institute](#).

"I've called this the greatest conservation challenge of our lifetime. I don't mean to downplay the challenge of conserving species and ecosystems, but languages are more critically endangered," Harrison said. "They are going extinct faster, and these languages contain some of the secrets to human survival and adaptation on our planet."

In his book, *When Languages Die*, Harrison says most of the world speaks one of 83 dominant languages and we are losing a native language roughly every 10 days.

"You have half the world's languages, 3,500 languages and they are spoken by 0.1 percent of the world's population. So if you care about the distribution of knowledge, you have a huge amount of our collective human wisdom and knowledge that's held by a tiny, tiny speaking population and it's under intense pressure from global languages and globalization," he said.

The project team concentrates its efforts in regions identified as language hotspots. Harrison explains, "A hotspot is a place where you have extreme diversity, high levels of endangerment and low levels of scientific documentation."



Among those he has interviewed - the last three speakers of an oral language in Australia's Northern Territory.

Kolawaya is the whispered language of a few medicine men in Bolivia.

Thanks in part to the Enduring Voices project; there is new interest in native languages in some schools in Australia, North America and elsewhere.

Project scientists cannot save all the languages heading for extinction. Their goal is to document what they can, and make us aware that when a language is lost, knowledge is lost, too.

Last three speakers of 'Kolawaya'

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