



How do you say 'linguistic diversity' in Yawuru?

Languages dying out the world over

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LINGUISTIC diversity is threatened in all four corners of the Earth. That's the message in a map of endangered language "hotspots" compiled as part of a project called Enduring Voices, which is backed by the US National Geographic Society.

Most attempts to document linguistic diversity simply count the number of languages spoken in each geographic area. By this measure, Papua New Guinea – with more than 800 languages – stands out as the most diverse country. Africa, meanwhile, boasts some 2000 of the world's estimated 7000 languages.

However, neither feature in the top five language hotspots (see Map) identified by David Harrison of Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania and Gregory Anderson of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages in Salem, Oregon. In place of a simple count, they have highlighted regions that host languages from a large number of distinct families, places where languages are most under threat

of extinction, and where linguists have done little research.

The top five include some entries that may come as a surprise, such as Oklahoma and the south-west US, where Native American languages are rapidly dying out. Top of the list is northern and central Australia, with 153 languages from 62 families. They include Yawuru, spoken by just three people in Broome, Western Australia, putting

it on the brink of extinction.

Languages are threatened worldwide as historically isolated populations with a distinct linguistic heritage get subsumed into societies where a few dominant languages hold sway. This extinction crisis is so severe that the list of hotspots may change rapidly. Until about 60 years ago, for instance, northern California would have been in the top 10. Since then, English and Spanish have wiped out Native American languages in the area.

The approach was inspired by the concept of hotspots of threatened biodiversity, which has proved a powerful tool in getting people to think about conservation priorities. Harrison and Anderson hope their map will highlight regions that should be prioritised for linguistic study. They are also placing their data on the web, so other linguists can make their own assessments. "Others are welcome to come up with their own map of hotspots," says Harrison.

Under the Enduring Voices project, the researchers intend to visit as many hotspots as possible and make recordings of the most endangered tongues. Ultimately, though, saving languages lies with the communities themselves, says Harrison. Children need to feel their native languages matter, he says, so efforts such as airing local radio shows in these languages can make a difference. ●

DISAPPEARING LANGUAGES

The top five hotspots, based on the number of distinct language families in use, places where languages are most under threat of extinction, and where linguists have done little research



“Folks make mistakes. I don’t think it would serve any effective purpose to try to point fingers.”

Harold Davis, associate vice-president for research at the University of Texas at Austin, who last week admitted that the university had reported only three of 13 laboratory accidents involving pathogens since January 2000 (*Austin American-Statesman*, 13 September)

“Couples don’t realise what they have in each other. It’s like a gold mine they’re not mining.”

Psychologist **Carolyn Shaffer** on how the modern trend of using drugs such as Viagra and hormone-replacement therapies to spice up couples’ sex lives may not be as effective as simple things like communicating with each other and fostering closeness (*The Washington Post*, 18 September)

“Water fowl usually carry the virus without showing any symptoms. This time, 10,000 of them died in a very short period – this could be something quite new.”

Lo Wing-lok of the Hong Kong Society for Infectious Diseases on an outbreak of H5N1 flu that has killed 10,000 ducks in two weeks in Guangdong province, China (*Bloomberg*, 18 September)

“Is the choice between losing your life and losing everything really a choice?”

John Seffrin of the American Cancer Society on its change of emphasis from cancer prevention to a campaign to make cancer drugs and tests available to everyone under the US healthcare system (*Reuters*, 17 September)

“It smells like mammoth dung.”

Climate change scientist **Sergei Zimov**, after picking up muddy ooze from thawing permafrost in northern Siberia. Global warming is beginning to expose the organic leftovers of prehistoric animals that once roamed the region (*MSNBC.com*, 17 September)