

Languages face extinction in NT

By Dewi Cooke
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MORE languages are at risk of extinction in Northern Australia than any other place in the world, researchers have found.

Linguists in the United States have identified five global "hot spots" where languages are dead or dying, and the 153 indigenous languages spoken in the far north of Australia are considered most at risk.

This has contributed to an extinction rate that outstrips that of mammals, plants and birds with one language disappearing every two weeks, and at least 20 per cent of the world's languages in imminent danger of becoming extinct.

Such extinction translates into a loss of knowledge, researcher K. David Harrison said.

"When we lose a language, we lose centuries of thinking about time, seasons, sea creatures, reindeer, edible flowers, mathematics, landscapes, myths, music, the unknown and the every day," he said.

Patrick McConvell, language research fellow at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, said the loss of indigenous languages was devastating not only to Aboriginal communities but to wider Australia.

"(Maintaining language) is of enormous value not only for indigenous people's heritage but for all our heritage," he said. "And, of course, we're struggling now with lots of problems and big interventions going on with indigenous people, and at the same time there's not a lot of attention paid to the fact that a lot of indigenous people think that maintaining their language and culture is an important part of keeping their society together."

In some areas, rarely-spoken indigenous languages have died with the last speaker or been replaced by a more dominant language group. Linguists have been working to document languages before they disappear entirely, a process Dr McConvell said can take up to 12 months.

"The speed of loss of languages in Australia is the highest in the world, and this has been noted by other people before. Obviously, without a major effort they're not going to do much about that, but (linguists) are trying to focus on what they can," he said.

Among the other hot spots identified by US researchers were a region of Central America covering Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Brazil and Bolivia; North America including British Columbia

and the US states of Washington, Oregon, Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico; and Eastern Siberia.

Half the world's languages have disappeared in the past 500 years, and half of the remainder are likely to vanish this century, Mr Harrison said.

Many of the languages are not translated easily into English. In the endangered south Siberian language Todzhu, for example, the word "chary" means "five-year-old male castrated reindeer that can be used for riding."

Harrison and Living Tongues director Gregory D.S. Anderson have identified five language "hot spots" where the extinction rate is particularly high, they said at a news conference sponsored by the National Geographic Society, which is supporting their research.

One such area encompasses Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico, where 40 languages spoken by American Indians are at risk. Only five elderly members of the Yuchi tribe, for example, are fluent in the Yuchi language, which might be unrelated to any other language.

In Australia, researchers said there were three known speakers of the Magati Ke language in the Northern Territory, and three Yawuru speakers. The team found one elderly speaker of Amurdag, which previously had been declared extinct, and he barely could recall the language spoken by his father.

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