

Dying Cultures

An article by Antonio Volpe Pasini, VP of Angel Conservation

What is it that really gives an advantage to humankind over the rest of the animal kingdom? The ability to communicate: more simply languages. Any language. So when a language dies not only part of our past dies but also does a part of our future. A future of cultural diversity that is fast disappearing. Much more so than all the fauna and flora species presently facing extinction.

According to UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*, a language is considered endangered when children no longer speak it, moribund when only a handful of elderly speakers are left, and extinct when it is no longer spoken. The numbers vary by source, but even the most optimistic estimates are alarming, with half of the world's languages struggling to survive. Some sources declare 5,000 of the 6,000 total (96% of which are spoken by only 4% of the global population) in some state of endangerment and, based on the most recent data, one of them dies every 14 days. As of today 90% of these languages are spoken by less than 100 thousand people, there are 357 with less than 50 native speakers, and 46 with only one.

A trend that started over five hundred years ago, with colonization being the biggest "culprit". Since then 4.5% of the total number of languages has disappeared, compared with 1.9% of mammal and 1.3% of birds. As an example, since 1600 of the 176 languages spoken by the tribes of North America 52 have become extinct, and of the 235 by the Australian Aborigines 31 have died.

Stopping this trend is therefore crucial, as any culture can be expressed and conveyed in any language, but the native one is by far the more effective as it not only represents the culture but it is also its own contribution to that culture: vocabulary, greetings, humor oral traditions are its substance, not merely means of communication. Many efforts are underway to reverse the trend of language disappearance as in New Zealand, where an aboriginal Maori-speaking community established Kohanga Reo (language nests) in 1982. In these cultural oases, young children are steeped in the language, spoken by a paid staff of elderly native speakers and younger teachers. Largely due to the proliferation of these nests, which cultivate a cozy, playful atmosphere, the language has rebounded. Another approach to language preservation, though more pessimistic, is complete documentation. This is difficult in the many cases of indigenous languages that have no written form. In such cases, records depend heavily on the use of video and audiotape.

But there is also another tool that can prove invaluable for language revitalization: ecotourism, as it can create a global interest regarding this problem. It is for this reason that Angel Conservation Corporation – a not for profit organization based in New York and dedicated to the preservation of native cultures around the world – has joined forces with Angel-Eco Tours, Inc. and is actively implementing programs focused on the preservation of the language and culture of the Pemón Indians of Venezuela.

For more information on their projects on native cultural preservation and sustainable tourism visit the following websites: www.angelconservation.org and www.angel-ecotours.com