

# RECOVERING VOICES

DOCUMENTING AND SUSTAINING ENDANGERED LANGUAGES AND KNOWLEDGE



## DISAPPEARING LANGUAGES AND KNOWLEDGE

Recovering Voices, a new initiative led by the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in partnership with other Smithsonian units, promotes the documentation and revitalization of the world's endangered languages and the knowledge preserved in them.

Some 6,000 languages are spoken in the world today, but this linguistic diversity is severely threatened. Cultural, political, and economic forces pressure many communities to replace their languages with those of the larger societies in which they live. Experts estimate that a language disappears every 14 days. At this rate, **90 percent of the world's languages will no longer be spoken by the end of this century.**

Language is integral to what makes us human. Each language offers unique insights into the workings of the human mind and the ways in which people understand and interact with their social, cultural, and natural environments. **When a language disappears, knowledge crucial to understanding humanity and the natural world is lost forever.**

(Left Photo) Koivi Evo'o (right) and family discuss photographs of their former village taken in 1922 by F. E. Williams. Mapaio Village, Papua New Guinea, 2001  
(Right Photo) The late Peter Jack and Clarence Jackson, Tlingit advisers to the Museum's Arctic Studies Center, study a Wolf crest clan hat at the National Museum of the American Indian's Cultural Resources Center, 2005

## THE CHALLENGE

The principal challenge to the world's linguistic diversity is the **rapid decline in the number of younger speakers.** This trend can be reversed only if the speakers of endangered languages ensure that their children and grandchildren learn them. Younger generations, in turn, must be convinced of the value of their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Efforts to sustain endangered languages often are hampered by **discrimination against their speakers.** Longstanding misconceptions about the value of linguistic diversity within the larger societies where endangered languages are spoken must be eliminated to foster broad-based support for sustaining these languages.

**Many languages and the knowledge they contain disappear before they are documented,** limiting possibilities for research and revitalization in the future. Innovative approaches to creating and preserving a record of endangered languages must be developed.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF  
NATURAL HISTORY

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN AND THE CENTER FOR FOLKLIFE AND CULTURAL HERITAGE



Mariha Mariha (right) teaches Joshua Bell how to make a marriage exchange object. Iuku Village, Papua New Guinea, 2000



Achu Kantule (left), of the San Blas Kuna community of Panama, and Jake Homiak examine a map of the Kuna sacred landscape drawn around 1925 by Mr. Kantule's grandfather. Museum Support Center, Maryland, 2009

## THE OPPORTUNITY

Addressing the crisis confronting the world's languages requires the collaboration of communities, research institutions, and other organizations. **The convergence of key factors now offers unprecedented opportunities to develop this collaboration on a global scale.** Speakers of endangered languages are seeking support from outside their communities for their efforts to save their languages. A growing number of countries are recognizing that the linguistic and cultural diversity within their borders contributes significantly to their vitality as nations. Museums, universities, and other organizations are identifying language documentation and revitalization as among their highest priorities. Advances in technology facilitate global communication and allow information about endangered languages to be recorded, preserved, and shared much more efficiently than ever before.

## WHY US?

The Smithsonian is well-positioned to provide **crucial leadership** in a global effort to document and sustain the world's endangered languages and knowledge. No other institution combines an international reputation for excellence in scholarship, education, and outreach with the scientific expertise and linguistic, cultural, and natural science collections required to fulfill this role. We have in place the foundation for a global network of communities, museums, universities, and other organizations dedicated to this endeavor, based on decades of collaboration. The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage have joined the Museum to develop Recovering Voices, as will other Smithsonian divisions in the future.

## THE WORK

Recovering Voices builds upon **work carried out worldwide by our researchers**. Globalization Curator Joshua Bell collaborates with communities in **Papua New Guinea** to examine threats to their traditional knowledge from the extraction of the region's natural resources. Mammals Curator Kristofer Helgen works with communities in New Guinea and **Southeast Asia** to study wildlife in these biologically diverse ecoregions. In **Mexico** and **California**, Linguistics Curator Gabriela Pérez Báez provides expertise in community-based projects to sustain Zapotec languages and explores the impact of transnational migration on the survival of these languages. Ethnology Curator Igor Krupnik **works with Native communities in Alaska** to document traditional knowledge about an environment increasingly jeopardized by global warming. Decades-long collaboration with these communities and the Anchorage Museum, coordinated by Aron Crowell, Director of the Alaska Office of the Museum's Arctic Studies Center, has generated a variety of research projects and public programs.

The Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives maintains extensive documentation of many of the world's endangered languages and cultures. These objects are being digitized to make them more accessible to communities, researchers, and the general public. Emeritus Senior Linguistics Curator Ives Goddard relies on the Archives' vast collection of manuscripts written in the Meskwaki language of **Iowa** to gain new insights into this threatened language. Geology Curator Tim McCoy works with fellow members of the Miami Tribe of **Oklahoma** to revive the Miami language, unspoken now for thirty years. Their efforts are possible only because the Museum and other repositories have preserved the detailed record of these languages created by linguists in the past.



Mrs. Rosaura López Cartas making *geta zu-kii*, hand made baked tortillas. Mrs. Rosaura is Gabriela Pérez Báez' primary consultant in the development of a Juchitán Zapotec dictionary. Oaxaca, Mexico, 2009



"There is a lot of sleeping information within each material piece—language, memories, and cultural meanings. When elder tribal members visited the Museum's collections, long dormant words and recollections came to them almost like dreams. It is contact with the actual objects and discussion among community members that will awaken the information inside."

JONELLA LARSON WHITE, *St. Lawrence Island Yupik*

(pictured center, with her mother Angela Larson (right) and aunt Gertrude Toolie. Nome, Alaska, 2010)



"A documented language can never be extinct. Native communities can use documentation to revitalize their language, even in the absence of speakers. In the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, our language is being reintroduced to the community using written documentation collected a century or more ago. Language revitalization goes hand-in-hand with cultural revitalization, strengthening traditional ways of thinking about our people, place, and relationships."

TIM MCCOY, *Citizen, Miami Tribe of Oklahoma and Geologist*

(pictured with Miami young people during a summer workshop on Miami science and traditional ways of knowing. Miami, Oklahoma, 2008)



Nenets children in northwest Siberia, members of one of very few Indigenous societies in Russia who have preserved their language and traditional way of life. Yamal Peninsula, Russia, 1995

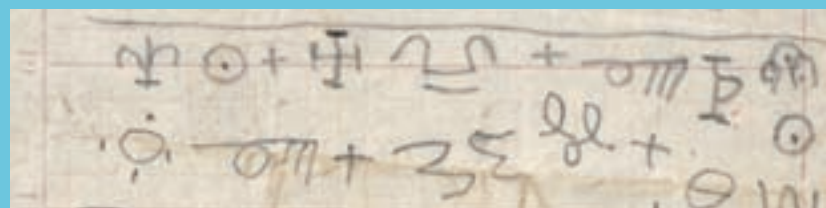
During the next five years, Recovering Voices will pursue its mission by:

- Building an international network of communities, institutions, and scholars to collaborate on documenting and revitalizing the world's endangered languages and knowledge systems.
- Completing detailed inventories of Smithsonian endangered languages collections and identifying the most effective ways to make these collections more accessible.
- Creating a grants program to support research at the Smithsonian and around the globe, especially by community-based scholars.
- Developing training programs in endangered language documentation and revitalization.
- Organizing symposia and workshops for scholars and community members to exchange perspectives.
- Producing a website to provide information on Recovering Voices and to serve as a clearinghouse for information related to endangered languages and knowledge.
- Designing and implementing a public education and outreach program to include exhibitions, web-based presentations, public lectures, and popular publications.

### THE IMPACT

Recovering Voices will create an integrated program of research, education, and outreach **to address the challenges facing the world's endangered languages and knowledge**. The program will increase public awareness about the loss of the world's linguistic diversity and its implications for all of humanity. It will generate new research on threatened languages and knowledge and will support the development of new scholars, especially those affiliated with communities whose languages are endangered.

Through Recovering Voices, communities seeking to revitalize their languages and knowledge systems will have greater access to the Smithsonian's expertise and incomparable collections. In collaboration with these communities, the collections will be significantly expanded and enhanced, increasing their value as a resource for research in a variety of scholarly disciplines.



Like many other Indigenous writing systems, the syllabary used to write the Loma language of West Africa is highly endangered. This sample is preserved in the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives.

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