

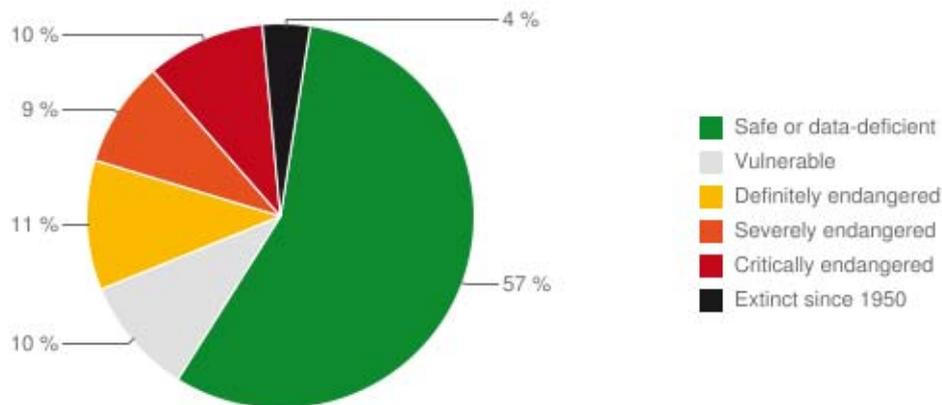


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## UNESCO's Endangered Languages Programme

It is estimated that, if nothing is done, half of the over 6,000 plus languages spoken today will disappear by the end of this century. With the disappearance of unwritten and undocumented languages, humanity would lose not only an inreplaceable cultural heritage but also valuable ancestral knowledge embedded, in particular, in indigenous languages.

### Overview of Vitality of the World's Languages



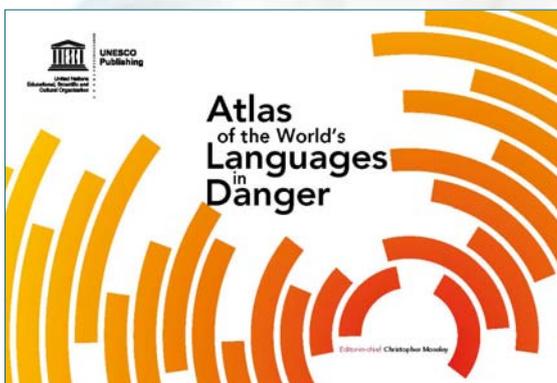
Source: *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*  
<http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas>

However, this process is neither inevitable nor irreversible: well-planned and effectively implemented language policies can bolster ongoing efforts of speaker communities to maintain or revitalize their mother tongues and pass them on to younger generations.

The aim of UNESCO's Endangered Languages Programme is to support communities, experts and governments by producing, coordinating and disseminating

- tools for monitoring, advocacy, and assessment of language status and trends; and
- services such as policy advice, technical expertise and training, good practices and a platform for the exchange and transfer of skills.

### UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger



Since its creation in 1996, UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* has emerged as a foremost awareness-raising / advocacy tool and an easily accessible mechanism to monitor trends in linguistic diversity. The third edition, published in 2010, lists some 2,500 endangered languages and provides analytical reports by region.

<http://www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages/>



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The interactive online version of the Atlas, available since 2009, provides the following data for the listed languages: name, degree of endangerment, country(ies) where it is spoken, number of speakers, relevant projects, sources, ISO language codes and geographic coordinates. It is widely accessible, interactive and continually updated through user feedback.

## Linkages between linguistic diversity and biodiversity



There is a fundamental linkage between language and traditional knowledge related to biodiversity. Local and indigenous communities have elaborated complex classification systems for the natural world, reflecting a deep understanding of local flora, fauna, ecological relations and ecosystem dynamics. A number of recent studies have shown that environmental knowledge embedded in indigenous names, oral traditions and taxonomies is often lost when a community shifts to another language.

By monitoring the vitality and diversity of indigenous languages, we may be able to identify trends in traditional knowledge related to biodiversity. An increase in the number of endangered and extinct languages would represent a loss of knowledge which in turn may have negative implications for biodiversity maintenance and protection. Conversely, a decline in the number of threatened languages would indicate language preservation, which will positively impact traditional knowledge and thus, biodiversity.

Photo credits: Discovery Communications, Inc.

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