



t e r r a l i n g u a
Partnerships for Linguistic and Biological Diversity

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Langscape

Terralingua Update

Terralingua News

Guelph, Ontario, Canada, November 2003.

Dear Members,

Greetings from Canada! In 2003-4, I'll be in Guelph, Ontario, while our office in Washington, D.C. will remain the main center of operations.

Last month, Guelph was also the location of Terralingua (TL.)'s 2003 Board meeting. One of the main points on the agenda was the election of a new Vice-President and Treasurer for 2004, due to Tove Skutnabb-Kangas's and Dave Harmon's resignations from the respective positions effective December 31 of 2003, one year ahead of the end of their terms of office. Both Tove and Dave have served on the Board from TL.'s official inception and have been true pillars of our organization. Over the years, they have given a tremendous amount of time, energy, and brainpower to TL. and have had a crucial role in making TL. what it is. They will be missed as Board members, but have agreed to join our Advisory Panel and will continue to contribute substantively to our work. The Board had the challenging task of choosing suitable replacement candidates for the two positions. We are delighted to announce that the task was successfully accomplished through the election of E. Annamalai, retired Director of the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysore, India and currently one of our Advisory Panel members, as Vice-President, and of Ray Victorine, Executive Director of Sustainable Seattle, a not-for-profit organization in Seattle and a member of the conservation finance program of the Wildlife Conservation Society, as Treasurer. They will take office on January 1, 2004, for one year, until the general Board elections at the end of 2004. In the next issue of *Langscape* early next year we will officially introduce these new Board members to you.

Another significant issue we discussed at the Board meeting was how to strengthen and expand our network of members, supporters, partners, and collaborators around the world. As a key first step in that direction, we are launching a survey to collect up-to-date information about our membership as well as to obtain your ideas on various member-relevant matters. The survey is being distributed along with this issue of *Langscape*, and we strongly encourage all of you to get back to us as soon as possible. We do wish to have an active and mutually beneficial relationship with our members,

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Support Terralingua!

Terralingua membership is free because we believe that information about biocultural diversity should be available to everyone. However, your financial support will help us continue to work towards our goal of protecting and perpetuating global biocultural diversity. Member donations are the bedrock of Terralingua's financial base, helping to cover our basic operating expenses. We recommend a minimum contribution of US\$25./year (US\$35./year for organizations); more is, of course, most welcome! A donation of US\$100.-or more will make you a Donor Member. Terralingua is a registered charity in the U.S.A., so donations are tax deductible. Please visit our Web site (www.terralingua.org) for secure on-line donations, or send a check/cheque or (international) money order to our head office in Washington, D.C. (address at the end of the newsletter). We thank all those who have already helped fund Terralingua this year.

and to accomplish this we need your help! Please do take a few moments to fill out and return the survey. Please return the survey by e-mail or to our office in Washington, D.C. Our address is 1630 Connecticut Ave, N.W., Suite 300, Washington, D.C., 20009.

The previous issue of *Langscape* came out in the spring of this year. There has been a lag in production, due to the internal reorganization at our Washington office after Anthea Fallen-Bailey relinquished her position as TL newsletter Editor, Web Manager and Membership Secretary — tasks she so valiantly performed during TL's "formative years", and for which we remain deeply grateful to her. We apologize for the delay, but are happy to announce that these tasks are now in the capable hands of our new staff member, Program/Administrative Assistant Morgan Bennett, who joined us in the early summer. Morgan has also taken on a wide variety of administrative and program activities, assisting our Executive Director Francine Madden and myself. In the short period she has been with us, she has already shown herself to be highly competent, motivated, and committed — a much needed and welcome addition to our team!

With Morgan's help, we'll bring *Langscape* back to its regular quarterly schedule by early 2004. In the next issue, we'll include our latest Annual Report, currently in preparation. On an exceptional basis, this report will cover the extended period July 2001-December 2002. Because in 2002 we changed our fiscal year to the calendar year (previously it went from mid-year to mid-year), we also had to change the reporting period for Annual Report purposes. The upcoming Annual Report, therefore, will be a "bridging" one that will bring us in line with our new fiscal reporting system. After this, each Annual Report will cover the previous calendar year.

news is the grant that TL received from The Christensen Fund (T.C.F.) — the Palo Alto, California, foundation we told you about a few months ago, whose mission and goals very closely match TL's. (Find later in this issue the T.C.F. announcement about its new team of program officers with first-hand knowledge and experience in the geographical regions in which T.C.F. operates.) We were delighted to hear last spring that T.C.F. agreed to support the initial implementation of the next phase of our Global Biocultural Diversity Assessment, consisting of the following components (more on which below):

1. Continuing work on our global G.I.S. (Geographic Information Systems) database of the world's environments and ethnolinguistic groups.
2. Further elaboration of the Index of Biocultural Diversity.
3. Initiation of a regional biocultural diversity assessment in the Sierra Tarahumara of northern Mexico.
4. Development of a Global Source Book on Biocultural Diversity.
5. Promotion of the biocultural diversity perspective in the conservation community, the media, and the general public.

Here are the details:

1. *Global G.I.S. database of the world's environments and ethnolinguistic groups.* The initial work we did with W.W.F. first and later under our Ford Foundation grant has been taken to the next level by Francine Madden through collaboration with the Conservation Biology Institute, a G.I.S. non-profit based in Oregon. New layers of representation of the state of the world's environments have been added and new analyses are being performed of the overlapping distributions of biodiversity and linguistic-cultural diversity. This will allow us to better examine observable patterns as well as ask

more precise questions about what may account for these findings and what their significance may be for both cultural-linguistic survival and environmental conservation. This in turn will improve our ability to make appropriate policy recommendations and promote relevant work on the ground. Our new materials were shown, in collaboration with Conservation International, at the World Parks Congress (W.P.C.) held on September 7-17 in Durban, South Africa, where TL. was represented by Francine. This event, and contacts made by Francine at the W.P.C., will give us the momentum for a TL.-organized workshop early next year, in which we'll bring together experts in G.I.S., conservation, ethnocartography, anthropology, and linguistics to assess the state of this work and plan the next steps, most likely with a focus on gathering more detailed data at sub-global (regional or local) scales.

2. *Index of Biocultural Diversity (I.B.C.D.)*. The I.B.C.D. is modeled after indices used in the environmental field to gauge current conditions and trends in the state of the environment. Its purpose is to serve as a benchmark for changes in global biocultural diversity. Using a small number of indicators (variables thought to be representative of current conditions and trends), the I.B.C.D. aims to point toward a general understanding of what is happening to biocultural diversity, as well as toward the gaps in knowledge. This first-of-its-kind index is, in turn, meant to fill a significant gap in global environmental assessments, in which the dearth of meaningful socio-cultural indicators is often lamented. This gap seriously hampers the deployment of a "humans-in-environment" perspective in such assessments. The draft framework for the I.B.C.D., prepared by Dave Harmon and Jonathan Loh, has been receiving very positive initial comments from external reviewers. As a part of the review process, Dave and Jonathan will prepare a research report on the I.B.C.D. to be submitted to a scholarly journal. Once this review process is completed, a revised framework for the I.B.C.D. will be prepared, paving the way to the further elaboration of the Index, which will include time-series data, where possible, to track changes and trends in biocultural diversity over time. To perform this monitoring, we envision that, in addition to data on linguistic vitality, it would be very useful to have indicators of the state of traditional ecological knowledge. In this connection, next year Dave and Jonathan plan to give a workshop on the I.B.C.D. at the International Congress of Ethnobiology (to be held in Kent, England, June 13-17, 2004), in order to gather ideas on the development of such indicators.

3. *Biocultural diversity assessment in the Sierra Tarahumara*. Following an invitation from local Rarámuri groups and individuals in the Sierra Tarahumara of northern Mexico, we have teamed up with the Mexico North Research Network/México Norte Red de Investigación, a U.S.A.-Mexican non-profit, to conduct an assessment of biocultural diversity and ecosystem health in that part of the world. This assessment, to be conducted in close collaboration with the Rarámuri and other Sierra residents, will "zoom in" on the Sierra Tarahumara as a region of both high biodiversity and resilience of local communities, on the one hand, and serious threats to and erosion of this diversity and resilience. We will bring together an interdisciplinary, international (Mexico-U.S.-Canada), and intercultural group of experts to first review the state of knowledge about the environment and the people of the Sierra and then work to fill the gaps, leading to a comprehensive assessment, to be published in report form. The assessment will formulate recommendations for policy, management, and community action, including plans for the sustainability of local ecosystems, languages, traditional knowledge, and cultural traditions. It will also educate policy makers, the media, and the general public in Mexico and elsewhere on issues of biocultural diversity. The first planning meeting for the assessment will be held in March of 2004 in the Sierra Tarahumara.

4. *Global Source Book on Biocultural Diversity*. The goals of the Source Book will be to survey:

1. Research on the links between linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity and between language, ecological knowledge, and the environment.
2. Projects, programs, and initiatives from all continents through which biocultural diversity is being fostered or revitalized.

Biocultural diversity research will be reviewed in order to provide a rigorous yet concise and accessible overview and assessment of the relevant literature and a listing of the main references, outlining both the key advances and the gaps and pointing to the necessary next steps. The survey of biocultural diversity projects, programs, and initiatives will aim to produce a thorough inventory and classification of such activities around the world and then publish "model" examples of work that support biocultural diversity, including discussion

of “best practices” and “lessons learned” and offering guidance for future efforts at biocultural diversity maintenance and restoration. The ideal projects we seek to survey are *integrated* projects — projects that work on environmental, cultural, and linguistic issues in a synergistic way, recognizing the fundamental link between language, knowledge and the environment and attempting to build on that link in crafting equitable and sustainable solutions to both environmental and social problems. We seek also projects that are either grassroots-initiated and conducted, or jointly planned, led, and managed by both local people and outsiders, and in which the rights and welfare of the local people involved are in the foreground. The Source Book will give the biocultural diversity field its very first global source of information. Beneficiaries of this work will include local communities and non-governmental organizations, policy makers, governments, researchers, media, and the general public. A further goal of the Source Book will be to foster interactions, discussions, evaluations and concrete recommendations among and between researchers and practitioners from the relevant fields and from different parts of the world, including indigenous, minority, and local people involved in activities to support their cultures, languages, and environments. The next issue of *Langscape* will contain a detailed call for contributions to the Source Book. In the meantime, if you would like to send initial information about any biocultural diversity project, programs, or initiatives you’re involved in or know of, please do so by contacting me at <maffi@terralingua.org>.

5. *Promotion of the biocultural diversity perspective.* As indicated above, a major opportunity for promotion of the biocultural perspective came with the World Parks Congress. In addition to the workshop and other W.P.C. venues in which TL.’s concerns were raised, promotion occurred through distribution of our recent publications and of a brand new TL. pamphlet specifically geared to the conservation community. The pamphlet will continue to be a useful promotional tool beyond the W.P.C. Also, U.N.E.S.C.O. has finally published the booklet and map *Sharing a World of Difference: the Earth’s linguistic, cultural, and biological diversity*, which TL. produced and which was previewed last year at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa. The publication was long delayed for causes outside of our control, but should now be available from U.N.E.S.C.O. As soon as we have the relevant information we will post it on our soon-to-be-revamped

Web site. We also expect to have the publication in .pdf format on the Web site for those who may wish to take a shortcut by simply downloading it. In order to make the concept of “biocultural diversity” familiar to the general public, we also continue to work with a variety of educational and media organizations to convey the critical importance of biocultural diversity maintenance and restoration. This communication aspect is acquiring increasing importance in our eyes, and we hope to be able to further develop our ability to influence education, policy making, and applied work through improved communication strategies and tools. The imminent overhaul of our Web site will be a significant step in that direction.

Not a small reminder of the importance of effective and widespread communications about biocultural diversity was provided recently by two linked events. First came the publication in the British journal *Nature* of an article by the ecologist Prof. William J. Sutherland, titled “Parallel extinction risk and global distribution of languages and species” (*Nature* 423, May 15 2003, pp. 276-279). While Prof. Sutherland seems to be unaware of the work already carried out on this topic by TL. and others over the past several years, the fact that a natural scientist decided to take up the subject and independently came to similar conclusions is in itself indicative that the topic has reached beyond the boundaries of the intellectual niche in which it was originally conceived. We at TL. welcomed this development, but apparently our positive evaluation wasn’t shared by David Berreby, a science writer who published an article titled “Fading Species and Dying Tongues: when the two part ways” in the May 27, 2003 edition of Science Times, the science section of *The New York Times* (N.Y.T.) newspaper. His reaction to the Sutherland article was rather virulent, prompting him to lambast the efforts of both linguists and language communities to keep languages alive (see the text of Berreby’s article further on in this issue). Many of his statements were so ill-informed that several of us in TL. were in turn prompted to write letters to the N.Y.T. science editor to set the record straight (find these letters below as well). While our letters weren’t published, the following week’s edition of “Science Times” included several other letters of the same tenor, in particular one by Prof. Leanne Hinton of University of California at Berkeley, who has been instrumental in the establishment of the very successful “Master-Apprentice” program for learning heritage languages. In spite of this, however, when questioned by our Advisory Panel

member E. Annamalai (author of one of the letters reproduced below) about the possibility of a follow-up article that might provide a more balanced perspective, the science editor indicated that the N.Y.T. had no intention to devote more space to the topic!

Other signs of more integrative thinking between the natural and social sciences were apparent at two recent events that I attended in Australia and Canada, both focused on the topic of ecosystem health. The first event was “Airs, Waters, Places: a transdisciplinary conference on ecosystem health in Australia”, organized by Dr. Glenn Albrecht, a philosopher of transdisciplinarity, at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales, last April. It focused on the relationships between sense of place (and disruptions thereof) and the biophysical health of ecosystems as well as the biophysical, psychological, social, and cultural health of human communities. The second event was the International Forum on Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health, organized by I.D.R.C. (International Development Research Centre) of Canada and held in Montréal, Québec, last May. This Forum focused largely on practical experiences from around the world in which ecosystem health principles are applied in caring for human health. In both cases the transdisciplinary approach, which transcends disciplines and links knowledge and action in search of new emerging understandings, was prevalent and its benefits were clearly apparent. I found this field and this approach very germane to and conversant with the perspectives and goals of TL., and this is leading us to further exploration of the interconnections between biocultural diversity and ecosystem health. We hope that this is one way for us to move closer to achieving a goal that is foremost in our minds: to help establish, through our continued efforts, the critical mass that will tip the scale toward a saner, wiser, approach to the solution of environmental and human problems, an approach that will have as its preeminent value — indeed its critical value for planetary survival — that of caring for the earth and all its life forms and life expressions.

As always, all these efforts within TL. go hand in hand with our continued efforts to keep the organization adequately funded. We have started our next fundraising effort this fall, targeting a variety of foundations. At the same time, we recognize that our first and foremost line of support is you, our members. Without you, the significance of what we do would be radically diminished! You have generously supported to us

in the past, for which we are deeply grateful, and we do trust that through our work we are earning your continued generosity. We’ll soon be launching another member donation campaign. When you receive our letter in the mail, please show your support again!

With warm regards,

Luisa Maffi, President.

General News & Correspondence

ANNOUNCEMENT: THE CHRISTENSEN FUND NAMES THEIR PROGRAM OFFICER TEAM

23 June, 2003

The Christensen Fund (T.C.F.) of California is delighted to announce the appointment of its new Program Officer team, responsible for developing this foundation’s new grant making around the interface of arts and culture and environment through a bio-cultural diversity perspective in support of local resilience and international understanding. Each Program Officer will play the lead role in one of the following four regions of the world that T.C.F. has prioritized: The Greater American Southwest (Colorado Plateau, Sonora and the Sierra Tarahumara); Turkey, Iran & Central Asia; The African Rift Valley (focus on southwest Ethiopia); and Aboriginal Northern Australia & Melanesia. For more information on T.C.F., please consult our Web site <www.christensenfund.org>.

The new Program Officers will be joining T.C.F. during the summer and fall (see contact dates below) and will be formulating grant-making strategies consultatively over the next twelve months, for which the Fund strongly invites your suggestions and contributions. Whilst some grants will be made during this period, regular grant making will unfold later in 2004 and in 2005, once the strategies have been approved by the Board of Trustees, and shared with the relevant prospective

grantee communities.

Rafique Keshavjee. Born in South Africa and raised in Kenya, Dr. Keshavjee is a specialist on pluralism and the cultural history and artistic expression of the Middle East and Central Asia, with particular knowledge of minority and rural communities. He has held academic posts in the School of Architecture and Planning at M.I.T. and in the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, and served as Associate Dean at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London where, among other activities, he established and ran the Central Asia Unit. He comes to T.C.F. from the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, where he has been the Director of Humanities Project for Central Asia since 1997, working out of Dushanbe (Tajikistan) to support local efforts to reform the teaching of the humanities in nine Central Asian universities. His field research and policy advisorial work has included time in Turkey, Iran, Western China and South Asia. Dr. Keshavjee has also worked as a corporate financial analyst with Brown Brothers Harriman, and served for six years in a voluntary capacity as the Vice-Chair of the Aga Khan Foundation U.S.A. He has also animated the music of Steve Reich using Islamic geometry.

Dr. Keshavjee holds a B.A. in Sociology and Anthropology from the University of Minnesota and a Ph.D. in Anthropology and Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard, with a thesis on *Mysticism and Modernization among the Ismailis of Iran*, based on field research in the mountains of the northeast of that country in the approach to the revolution. Among his publications is an essay “Mysticism and the Plurality of Meaning” (Taurus Press, 1995) based on that research, and he has written a number of short stories, including “Entering”, about racism in East Africa, published by the *Toronto Review* in 1989, and another based on a visit to a Sufi shrine in Turkey.

Contact: <rafique@christensenfund.org> after July 1st, 2003.

Henrietta Marrie. Born and raised in the Aboriginal community of Yarrabah, southeast of Cairns in Queensland (Australia), Ms. Marrie has held academic posts at a number of Australian universities, including at the Centre for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Participation, Research and Development at the James Cook University of North Queensland, and the Centre for Indigenous History and the Arts at the University of Western Australia. Since

the mid 1980s, through her research and work in legislation and policy development, she has supported the Aboriginal movements in the arena of arts and cultural heritage, and in the recognition of Aboriginal rights to land and for the protection and recognition of traditional knowledge. Ms. Marrie has served on a number of government committees and inquiries, and acted as a consultant to government bodies including Environment Australia, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and the Wet Tropics Management Agency. Prior to joining T.C.F., she worked at the United Nations Environment Programme Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity where, since 1997 (with a short break) she has been the Programme Officer responsible for Article 8(j) of the Convention. In this capacity she was responsible for supporting Parties to the Convention in their initiatives to respect, maintain and preserve the traditional biodiversity-related knowledge of indigenous peoples and local communities, promote its wider application with the approval of its holders, and ensure the equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of their knowledge.

Ms. Marrie holds a Diploma of Teaching (South Australian College of Advanced Education), a Graduate Diploma of Arts (University of South Australia) and a Master of Environmental and Local Government Law (Macquarie University), with a thesis entitled *The Convention on Biological Diversity, Intellectual Property Rights, and the Protection of Traditional Ecological Knowledge*. She has published widely on Aboriginal cultural heritage, the arts and natural resource management, including “Possession is Nine Tenths of the Law — and don’t Aboriginal people know it!”, *Conference of Museum Anthropologists Bulletin*, No. 23, 1990.

Contact: <henrietta@christensenfund.org> after October 1st, 2003.

Enrique Salmón. Born on the Mexican-Californian border of Rarámuri heritage and culture, and raised in the Sierra Tarahumara of Mexico and in the United States, Dr. Salmón is an ethnoecologist specializing in the cultures, plants and landscapes of the Native Americans of the Greater Southwest. Dr. Salmón has worked with a number of institutions in the U.S. Southwest, including Colorado College and the Heard Museum, and is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Fort Lewis College, Colorado. In addition to his doctoral research and

other work in the Sierra Tarahumara Plateau, Dr. Salmón has undertaken a variety of applied research programs with Native Americans of the Colorado Plateau and environs in the United States and border area, including the Havasupai, Hopi, Navajo, Mayo and Yaqui, and has undertaken projects or board service with a number of environmental and Native American non-profit organizations working in this region. Dr. Salmón is also an accomplished musician, playing jazz double bass, electric bass and classical and jazz guitar, and an avid outdoor enthusiast engaging in whitewater canoeing and backcountry telemark skiing.

Dr. Salmón holds a B.S. in History and Social Science from Western New Mexico University, an M.A.T. from Colorado College in Southwestern Studies, and a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Arizona State University, with a thesis entitled *Sharing Breath With our Relatives: Rarámuri plant knowledge, lexicon, and cognition*. His publications include "Iwígara: a Rarámuri cognitive model of biodiversity" in *Biodiversity in Native North America*, eds. P. Minnis and W. Elisens, University of Oklahoma Press, 2000, and "Rarámuri Necklaces: a rapidly changing folk-art form in the Sierra Madre Occidental of Northern Mexico", *Journal of Ethnobiology* 17(1), 1997.

Contact: <enrique@christensenfund.org> after September 1st, 2003.

Wolde Gossa Tadesse. Born and raised in the Gamo Highlands of Southwest Ethiopia, Dr. Tadesse spent many years there as a lexicographer of the local Omotic languages, an N.G.O. official working with various agricultural communities, as a teacher and with the Ministry of Culture attending to such things as documenting oral tradition, archiving local religious manuscripts, establishing the first local museum to curate local artistic expression, and helping to re-establish traditional local authority in such areas as Konso and Gamo. In the last decade his research as an anthropologist focused on the close and complex ritual, institutional and economic relationships of the many peoples across the highly diverse environments of this region, particularly the pastoral peoples of the lowlands. Dr. Tadesse enjoys mountain trekking, cycling and playing tennis. He has taken part in a number of expeditions, including the Blue Nile Expedition and the Sobek Expedition. He currently holds a research position at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Germany.

Dr. Tadesse holds a B.A. in Ethiopian Languages and Literature from Addis Ababa University and an M.Sc. and Ph.D. in anthropology from the London School of Economics, with a thesis entitled *Warfare and Fertility: a study of the Hor (Arbore) of southern Ethiopia*. He has published a number of important articles including "Evading the Revolutionary State" in *Re-Mapping Ethiopia: the socialist state and after*, (eds. W. James, D. Donham, Eisei Kurimoto and A. Trulzi, James Currey, Oxford, 2002), and "Kalashnikovs and Cowrie Belts", in *Ethiopia in Broader Perspective: papers of the X111th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (eds. K. Fukui, E. Kurimoto and M. Shigeta, Shokado Booksellers, Kyoto, 1997). He has also been involved in the production of two films about Konso.

Contact: <wolde@christensenfund.org> after October 1st, 2003

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<<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/27/science/27ESSA.html?ex=105522>>

Fading Species and Dying Tongues: when the two part ways

May 27, 2003.
By David Berreby.

For the past decade, scholars and political activists have been working to get the rest of us worried about the future of the world's 6,000 or so spoken languages. One tool is an analogy: languages with fewer and fewer speakers, they argue, are like species heading for extinction.

A paper published on May 15 in *Nature* gives the comparison a statistical basis. The analysis, by Prof. William J. Sutherland of the University of East Anglia, notes that when standard measures of species risk are applied to language communities, human tongues

come out even more endangered than the animals.

The metaphor of “endangered languages” is both easy to grasp and appealing to the sense of fair play: fluent speakers of languages [such as] Kasabe, Ona and Eyak are dying off, while their children and grandchildren increasingly speak languages [such as] English, Chinese, Spanish or Swahili. Language preservationists have been using this analogy for years. The often-quoted question posed by Dr. Michael Krauss, an emeritus professor of linguistics at the University of Alaska, for instance, is: “Should we mourn the loss of Eyak or Ubykh less than the loss of the panda or the California condor?”

It is no surprise that linguists and activists promote maintaining spoken languages. Just as the Poultry and Egg Council wants us to eat eggs, linguists want languages to study. I wonder, though, where science ends and politics begins.

How, really, are the panda and Ubykh equivalent? The panda, once gone, is gone forever. If the information and political will are present, Ubykh can be revived 500 years from now. Hebrew, after all, was brought back from ancient texts into daily use after 2,000 years. Ubykh, a language of Turkey, is a human creation. The panda is not; it is our neighbor, not our invention.

Talk of endangerment and extinction suggests languages as a finite resource, like gas in a tank heading toward empty. Preservationists have predicted that only half the world’s currently spoken languages will be around in a century.

It would be a terrible thing to run out of languages. But there is no danger of that, because the reserve of language, unlike the gas tank, is refueled every day, as ordinary people engage in the creative and ingenious act of talking. Old words, constructions and pronunciations drop away, new ones are taken up, and, relentlessly, the language changes.

Every day, English, Spanish, Russian and French, along with almost all other living languages are being altered by speakers to suit changing times. In 2000, for example, another *Nature* paper revealed that even the Queen of England now pronounces her English less aristocratically than she used to. As Professor Sutherland noted in his paper, languages are in “continual flux.” That probably explains

why a recently settled island can be as rich in languages as a long-inhabited continent. That flux never stops. Even this morning, languages are being altered by their speakers to suit changing times and places.

In an era when languages continue to change with time, can’t we expect the big languages, like Latin before them, to blossom into families of related but distinct new tongues? Already, more than 100 new languages have been created out of the vast mixings of peoples and cultures of the last four centuries.

For example, on the preservationist Web site terralingua.org, one can find the organization’s statement of purpose in Tok Pisin, a language of Papua New Guinea. Tok Pisin did not exist 150 years ago. Like Haitian Creole, it is a new language, born of the last few centuries of human history.

So maybe the human race has all the languages it needs, and deserves. When we need a new one, we invent it. Language evolution is taking place every day; why interfere with it?

Preservationists call this an argument for accepting injustice. James Crawford, a thoughtful writer about language and a preservationist, notes that “language death does not happen in privileged communities.”

“It happens to the dispossessed and the disempowered, peoples who most need their cultural resources to survive,” he continues.

This is certainly true; many of the dying languages were systematically attacked by missionaries and governments in cruel, despicable ways. The game they lost was rigged. Abuses continue to be committed in the name of education, modernization and national identity, so the preservationists do good work in noting and protesting such practices.

It is important, though, to be clear about what — or rather, who — deserves protection. The right to remain safe and whole belongs to human beings, not to abstractions created to describe what human beings did yesterday.

The difference between a living creature with blood in its veins and a general notion should be obvious: your auburn-haired neighbor, nicknamed Red, has rights. The concept of “red” does not.

But don't people need their "cultural resources"? Sure, but because culture is reinvented by each person to suit a particular place and time, members of a culture will argue with one another about what those resources are. When we describe culture as an organism, we do not see the individuals inside it.

So if the study of languages is a scientific enterprise, the effort to preserve them is not. It is a political question: which voices represent the communities whose languages are fading?

Hearing how his ancestors were punished for speaking their own language at school, a young speaker might be persuaded by an elder to learn the ancestral tongue. That is a reason to preserve that language in the archives. Suppose, though, that the tales of days long gone do not resonate with this hypothetical child. Is it science's job to help the elder preserve his sense of importance at the expense of the younger?

Language bullies who try to shame a child into learning his grandfather's language are not morally different from the language bullies who tried to shame the grandfather into learning English. The elucidation of language in all its complexity is an enthralling scientific enterprise. But "saving endangered languages" is not a part of it.



Terralingua responses to Berreby's article:

Washington, 28 May, 2003.

Dear Science Times Editors:

If the Science section of *the New York Times* chooses to publish an opinion piece instead of a fact-based article, it should strive to ensure that the opinion expressed in such a piece is well informed and researched. This is not the case with David Berreby's "Fading species and dying tongues: when the two part ways" (*New York Times*, May 27, 2003, D3). There are far more misunderstandings and misconceptions in this piece than I can point to within space limits, so I'll confine myself to a few glaring ones.

The author appears to suggest there is nothing to

worry about if more than half of the world's 6000 languages will have disappeared in a century (or more exactly, if their speakers will have switched to another language). Languages, he argues, change all the time, and language evolution is a continuing process, so why interfere with it? If a language becomes "useless", he seems to imply, people will just drop it. If they need a new language, they'll invent one, as is the case with Pidgins and Creoles. We won't "run out of languages". People make choices, and it is people who deserve to be protected, not languages, i.e., "abstractions created to describe what human beings did yesterday" [sic].

Here, Berreby thoroughly conflates the processes of language change and evolution with those that lead to language obsolescence and extinction. Linguists have identified specific characteristics of language obsolescence that clearly differentiate this phenomenon from "normal" language change.

Furthermore, Berreby appears to consider that the choice to stop speaking a language (if it can be called a "choice", given the injustices and abuses against minority language speakers that the author himself acknowledges) is part and parcel of "natural" language evolution. It is not. Rather, it is an intensely social and cultural phenomenon deeply rooted in the economic and political domination of given human groups over others.

Finally, while new languages, and new variants of languages, are certainly being created, these processes are slower and their products fewer compared to the rate and magnitude of loss of existing languages. The web of the world's languages is not being replenished by a multitude of new languages. It is being impoverished by a small number of "big" languages like English, Spanish, or Chinese that are gobbling up the others. Here, as with the web of biological life on earth, the erosion of diversity is an alarming sign that our planet is sick. Lesser diversity in both cases means lesser resilience, a diminished ability to thrive and to rebound from stress. Linguistic monocultures are as vulnerable as agricultural ones are.

What is being lost in the process is not just a "laundry list" of expendable and interchangeable communication tools. It is a wealth of human creativity manifested in the diversity of languages, embodying the distinct ways in which humans have adapted (and continue to adapt) to the world around them, sought solutions to life's many

material and spiritual challenges, and expressed marvel and delight for the mystery and beauty of existence. The loss of a language is thus a loss for humanity, but it is first and foremost a loss for its former speakers: a loss of sense of self and community, of sense identity, integrity, coherence, and well-adjustedness — the psychological, social, cultural, and economic consequences of which are plain for everyone to see and can no

longer be gingerly discounted as mere externalities. Berreby’s image of “language bullies who try to shame a child into learning his grandfather’s language” is purely and simply ludicrous.

Over the past ten years, linguists and language advocates have gone a long way beyond the preservationist “language museum” paradigm that Berreby still attributes to them. It would have behooved the author to become better informed about current approaches. Incidentally, it would also have behooved him to more carefully peruse the Terralingua web site, which he mentions in his piece. Had he done that, he would have realized that Terralingua has never been a “preservationist” organization, but quite to the contrary has been a leader in supporting the continued vitality and resilience of the world’s languages and in promoting the linguistic human rights of their speakers.

Sincerely,

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28 May, 2003.

Dear Science Times Editors:

David Berreby’s essay “Fading Species and Dying Tongues: when the two part ways “ displays a most unfortunate lack of understanding of the basic issues involved in the collateral preservation of species and languages. He makes the fundamental error of supposing that whole new languages can be readily generated in the future to replace the ones now being lost. All languages are constantly

changing, but the geographical and communicative isolation that historically was responsible for the evolution of entirely new languages is gone forever. There is no reason to expect that new languages will evolve in the future on a scale to replace those threatened with extinction now. Nor is it realistic to think, as Berreby does, that documented languages can be revived at will, the example of Hebrew notwithstanding. Most languages at risk of extinction today are not fully documented, nor do they have a written tradition to draw from, as Hebrew did. In any event, the revival of Hebrew was a monumental effort that almost certainly cannot be replicated on a large scale.

Berreby believes that languages are just “abstractions” that should not have the same pull on our preservationist sympathies as “living creatures with blood in their veins.” By this logic, we should only be concerned about saving individual animals, not whole species — which, if we follow Berreby’s reasoning, are mere concepts. Yet the scientific movement to save biodiversity is not based upon an animal rights agenda, but rather on the premise that genes, species, and ecosystems are the real foundation of an objectively existing natural world. If they are just abstractions, if they only exist as projections of our minds, then there is no basis for assigning them rights. In fact, genes, species, ecosystems, and languages are not merely abstractions, but real entities existing in a real world — and all are worthy of scientific attention.

Finally, Berreby imagines that there are “language bullies” running around shaming kids into speaking their grandparents’ languages. As any language preservation activist can tell you, successful revitalization programs do not operate on a guilt-trip model. Language nests, immersion schools, and master-apprentice programs — real-life models that show promise for saving endangered languages — are grounded upon respect for a cultural tradition. As Berreby rightly notes, languages have been systematically attacked by missionaries and governments for centuries. Here, if anywhere, is where you will find language bullies.

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29. maj, 2003.

Dear Science Times Editors:

Below is a response to David Berreby's piece "Fading Species and Dying Tongues: when the two part ways," from May 27. I also attach it in Word. It is 797 words, including the title and the two references. I hope you will consider printing it — the piece is, in my view, so dangerous in its arrogance and relative ignorance that it should be discussed properly. Thank you.

Linguistic uniformity can endanger humankind.

David Berreby wrote on May 27th about "Fading Species and Dying Tongues: when the two part ways". Two comments on the faulty logic and its consequences. First, his example about the panda and Ubykh, one of the endangered languages (E.Ls.). Once the panda is gone, it is gone for ever, while an E.L. can be revived 500 years from now if the information and political will are present. Pandas (or equivalents in the plant world) — ever heard of gene banks, frozen sperm and eggs and D.N.As.? If the biological information has been adequately stored and the political will is present, specimens of a biological species can be recreated; and it takes less time and effort than recreating a language and enabling real people to start using it again for most purposes, including passing it on to the next generations. But it seems pretty uneconomical — some might even call it stupid — first to intentionally kill both biological species and E.Ls., and then to have to use a lot of time, effort, and money to recreate them. Especially when we know that E.Ls. do not die a "natural" death — they are very much being helped on their way. Most of them disappear as a result of linguistic genocide, which happens especially in schools, where children whose parents speak or have spoken an E.L. are forcibly transferred from their own group to another more powerful dominant group linguistically and culturally, because there is no teaching through the medium of their own languages, and where the punishment for speaking and/or shame for their and their ancestors language and culture, and the fact that they mostly do not learn much in school because of the foreign language, certainly causes serious mental harm to them. Both of these are defined as genocide, in the United Nations' Genocide Convention which most states have ratified

Article II(e), forcibly transferring children of the group to another group; an Article II(b), causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (emphasis added).

Instead of linguistic genocide, where big dominant languages are learned subtractively, at the cost of the E.Ls., schools could and should support E.L.-speakers in learning dominant languages additively, in addition to the E.Ls., something that is done in many countries and is no more expensive than the subtractive teaching. I am, by the way, writing this response in my fifth language in terms of order of learning... Secondly, new species and new languages may appear, but the pace is incredibly slow, as compared to the speed with which we are killing the present ones. Besides, the new languages would take centuries to develop the knowledges about their ecological and social environments that are encoded in the E.Ls. that they, according to Berreby, are to replace. Those knowledges are in no way "museum pieces" — they are dynamic survival strategies. If we kill both biological species and E.Ls. at the pace we are doing it today, we are risking the future of our planet. A quote from one of the world's most respected bilingualism researchers, Colin Baker (from his 2001: 281 review of Skutnabb-Kangas 2000): "Ecological diversity is essential for long-term planetary survival. All living organisms, plants, animals, bacteria and humans survive and prosper through a network of complex and delicate relationships. Damaging one of the elements in the ecosystem will result in unforeseen consequences for the whole of the system. Evolution has been aided by genetic diversity, with species genetically adapting in order to survive in different environments. Diversity contains the potential for adaptation. Uniformity can endanger a species by providing inflexibility and unadaptability. Linguistic diversity and biological diversity are inseparable. The range of cross fertilisation becomes less as languages and cultures die and the testimony of human intellectual achievement is lessened. In the language of ecology, the strongest ecosystems are those that are the most diverse. That is, diversity is directly related to stability; variety is important for long-term survival. Our success on this planet has been due to an ability to adapt to different kinds of environment over thousands of years (atmospheric as well as cultural). Such ability is born out of diversity. Thus, language and cultural diversity maximise chances of human success and adapt-

ability". In David Berreby's world only a few hundred big languages would survive; that would lead to exactly the uniformity that in Baker's world "can endanger a species". Linguistic diversity is a necessary prerequisite for choice, flexibility and creativity in humankind.

REFERENCES:

Baker, Colin (2001). Book Review of Tove Skutnabb-Kangas. *Linguistic Genocide in Education — or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* London: Erlbaum. 2000. xxxiii +785 pp. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 5:2, May 2001, 279-283.

U.N. International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (E793, 1948).

Dr. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Roskilde University, Denmark, and Åbo Akademi University, Finland, is vice-president of Terralingua: Partnerships for Linguistic and Biological Diversity and author or editor of some 30 books and close to 400 scientific articles.

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28 May, 2003.

Dear Editor

David Berreby, in his essay "Fading species and dying tongues: where the two part ways" (*New York Times' Science Times* of May 27, 2003), makes three points about scientists (linguists) preserving dying languages. His first point is that the language is a human invention (unlike the species); human inventions fade out; humans make new inventions; so death of languages deserves no mourning. The first three observations are true enough, but the conclusion from them is flawed not just because of the special circumstances, including the power of the state, that prevailed in the resurrection of languages [such as] Hebrew and Sanskrit, which were not dead like many oral indigenous languages, but were used in religious practices and had religious and other texts in them. It is flawed because of a fallacy in the analogy: the fading out of a language is not comparable to an invention becoming obsolete, but it is similar to a culture by its power obliterating an invention of another culture and making its invention a monopoly. Like what a giant company does to the product of a little company to promote

its not necessarily superior product.

The second point is that the language is an idea, and not an organism like species. Ideas die, and new ideas emerge. So do languages. True enough. But the language is more than an idea. It creates, codifies and disseminates ideas. Many languages mean many ideas; many ideas mean many choices for the humanity. Loss of one language is reduction in choices.

The third point is preservation of endangered languages is not science, but is politics. It is both. It is politics in the sense of giving people choices and thus empowerment. It is the choice to keep one's language against bulldozing by the language of the powerful people. Science and politics are not antitheses; both must strive for human dignity. The science that undermines human choice and human dignity is as bad as the politics that does the same.

Finally, science is a human invention and a human idea, like language. Just because it is so, no one will argue that we can let science die.

Sincerely,

Annamalai.

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END of LANGSCAPE #26



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