



**T**wo centuries ago 850 distinct languages and dialects were spoken across Australia. The original custodians of this continent were fluent in five, 10 or even more.

Today only 145 of these ancient tongues still exist, and 110 of them are critically endangered.

Two years ago, in an effort to stem a decline that started from the very moment Europeans arrived, the federal government urged immediate action to keep Aboriginal languages alive and to support Indigenous Australians connect with their language, culture and country.

That connection is vital to ensure cultural survival, according to submissions made to a parliamentary inquiry examining language learning in Indigenous communities.

is at the core of cultural identity and pride. If you don't have language, you don't have traditional law or culture and our connections to country. Certain concepts cannot be translated at all; others lose subtlety and nuance in the shift from one language to another."

Through its inquiry the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee wants to find out about the benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages, the contribution of Indigenous languages to closing the gap in Indigenous disadvantage, and the potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education. The committee is looking at measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language. The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities, and measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services are also being examined.

# LOST FOR WORDS

THE ANCIENT LANGUAGES OF THIS LAND ARE  
STRUGGLING TO FIND THEIR PLACE IN A MODERN WORLD.

STORY: GEOFFREY MASLEN

Located 460 kilometres from Darwin, the remote town of Wadeye is the sixth largest in the Northern Territory. The population of around 3,000 residents includes 20 land-owning groups speaking many languages including Marringarr, Magati Ke, Marri Amu, Marri Tjevin, Murrinh Nhuwanh and Murrinhpatha.

The message from community members to the House of Representatives Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Committee is strong and clear: "We want to talk in the languages we speak, hold them strong and teach our children in them. We don't want to have to leave part of ourselves at home when we come to school."

"We don't want our languages and our culture wiped out," they say in their submission. "We see in communities near us, they speak only English and have lost their language. We don't want this to happen here. We know who we are. We are not white people, we are black people and we know much about our land, our stories, our clans, our foods, that we want to teach our children. We have a lot of knowledge that you don't find in white English culture that is important to us."

It is a message echoed by the Papulu Apparr-kari Language Centre, based in Tennant Creek and representing 16 language groups of the Barkly region.

"Language is the meaning of things," their submission states. "Knowledge of language and recognition of its value

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"Knowledge of language and recognition of its value is at the core of cultural identity and pride."

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The overwhelming view expressed in the 100 plus submissions received to date is that children should be initially taught in their home language and that much more needs to be done to ensure not only the survival of the languages still being spoken but also the revival of those dying out.

John Hobson, coordinator of Indigenous languages education at the University of Sydney's Koori Centre, says in his submission that the benefits of giving attention to and recognising Indigenous Australian languages does not have to be spelled out yet again.

"Australia needs to move forward in this urgent issue, not remain locked in a loop of inaction," he says. "By giving substantial attention and recognition we may yet be able to save some of the languages, rather than remaining on track to be the world's worst steward of Indigenous cultural heritage."

The neglect and historical repression of Indigenous languages has been a core component in creating the gap the federal government now seeks to close, Mr Hobson says. By largely providing English-only schooling to children who live



**CONNECTION TO COUNTRY:** *Indigenous language learning helps keep traditions alive*

in non-English speaking communities, various governments over the past 200 years have directly overseen the inadequate education of generations of Indigenous Australians.

“They have effectively ensured that people fail to acquire fully functional versions of either their own language or English, thus confounding their educability for life. If the government wishes to use education to close the gap it should act to ensure high-quality mother tongue education is provided to those children who enter with English as a second language. If children receive a good primary education in a language they understand, they will acquire literacy and numeracy and an understanding of school processes that will allow them to subsequently acquire English as a second language sufficient to function satisfactorily in the world they occupy.”

Dr Michael Christie, a professor of education at Charles Darwin University, notes that Aboriginal languages are the only ones in the world to have evolved over the millennia to engage specifically with Australia’s natural and cultural environments. Professor Christie says environmental management and the preservation of biodiversity currently and into the future will be greatly enhanced by the indigenous knowledge of Aborigines who retain their traditional languages and practices.

“The continued use of [Aboriginal] languages in schools contributes to the possibilities of remote school-leavers becoming employed in this natural resource management work on country,” Professor Christie says. “[These] languages in schools contribute to high attendance rates through bringing together school and community, particularly community elders, parents and grandparents. Low attendance rates in schools will only be solved by redressing the

## “To be without language is to be without culture.”

increasing dislocations between schools and the communities they serve.”

Not surprisingly, a significant proportion of the submissions come from the Northern Territory. While the Territory has only one per cent of the Australian population, it has the largest number of Indigenous language speakers – nearly 56,000 Aboriginal people, or more than half of Australia’s total.

Attracting its fair share of criticism in submissions is the 2008 decision by the Northern Territory government requiring teachers in its schools to conduct classes only in English for the first four hours of each day. This decision effectively dismantled the Territory’s bilingual education program, notably in remote communities where local languages are still spoken.

The Territory government argued the policy was necessary to ensure children could speak English well enough to go on to further education or get a job. But many critics see the decision as a knee-jerk response to the first set of nation-wide literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN) test results indicating that Aboriginal children in remote area schools were performing poorly in literacy and numeracy.

“Alarmed by the publication of national test averages in September 2008 showing Territory students, particularly those in remote rural areas, were lagging behind, the government abandoned its commitment to support bilingual programs and introduced a new ad-hoc policy the following

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**CULTURAL IDENTITY:** *Language learning is a vital part of understanding who we are*

month,” says Dr Brian Devlin, an associate professor of bilingual education and applied linguistics at Charles Darwin University.

In his submission to the inquiry, he points out that for many children in remote schools English is rarely used in their communities outside the classroom. While at school they are actually learning English as a foreign language.

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### A commitment to Indigenous language learning is critical for the survival of the remaining languages.

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Another critic, Professor Rachel Nordlinger, says the Territory government’s decision has been devastating for bilingual education. “It has had all sorts of effects, not just the end of bilingual education and what that meant for the kids learning their own language but also for the professional and Indigenous teachers who had worked in the system for 20 years and who were suddenly no longer required – or reduced to acting as translators at the end of the classroom while the white teacher taught in English.”

A linguist at the University of Melbourne, Professor Nordlinger has been studying Aboriginal languages for more than two decades, visiting communities in northern Australia for weeks at a time and often recording the voices of the last speakers to try to ensure elements of their language are saved.

“What was flawed in the Territory government’s reaction was that it was not the bilingual program causing the bad test results,” she says. “Until the program was abandoned, children were taught literacy and numeracy in their home language up to grade two or three while learning oral

English. Then, as literacy teaching started in English, they could transfer their understanding of literacy and numeracy in the home language to English which they learn as a second language.”

As the House of Representatives committee charts the way forward for language learning in Indigenous communities, the submissions from those communities are helping in the collection of a unique body of evidence about the current teaching of Indigenous languages. A common emerging view is that a commitment to Indigenous language learning is critical for the survival of the remaining languages and the cultural health of the communities in which those languages are currently spoken.

In the words of the Papulu Apparr-kari Language Centre: “To be without language is to be without culture.” •

**“If children receive a good primary education in a language they understand, they will acquire literacy and numeracy.”**

**FOR MORE INFORMATION** on the inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities, visit [www.aph.gov.au/atsia](http://www.aph.gov.au/atsia) or email [atsia.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:atsia.reps@aph.gov.au) or phone (02) 6277 4559.