LANGUAGES, PLANTS AND EXTINCTION

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Category: Observations

Yesterday, I posted a link to an article about the importance of mother tongue education. Today, I'd like to draw your attention to another aspect of the importance of minority languages - ecology.

One of the sad facts of the age that we are living in is that languages are disappearing very quickly.

> *Language extinction is a tragic phenomenon that's been occurring worldwide, as languages spoken by precious few people are replaced by larger ones. Roughly one language ceases to be spokenÂ every four months, and 3,054 languages are currently endangered around the world.*

As someone with an interest in languages and with a theological conviction that they have an importance that goes beyond the purely material, I find it distressing that languages are fading out of use. However, even if we view things from a purely pragmatic point of view, there is a big concern here as highlighted in this article.

> *"Each indigenous language is therefore a unique reservoir of medicinal knowledge," researchersÂ write, "a Rosetta stone for unraveling and conserving nature's contributions to people."Â*
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> *...New research on indigenous languages in North America, Papua New Guinea, and the northwest Amazon reveals just how much crucial information could be lost as this occurs.Â*
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> ***In fact, our collective knowledge of medicinal plants appears more threatened by the loss of indigenous voices than it is from environmental destruction.*** *(Emphasis, mine)*

The Malian writer, Amadou HampatÃ© Ba is said to have said that when an old man dies in Africa, it is like a library burning down. Losing individuals who are a storehouse of knowledge is one thing, but when the language itself falls out of use, much that is known through the medium of that language can be lost.

In a world, where we have a growing need of products from the natural world, but in which eco-systems are increasingly threatened, we need the knowledge that these communities hold.

Language research is important *per-se*, it may actually be essential to our well being on this planet.

> *...it is theÂ knowledgeÂ surrounding these plants, passed from generation to generation for hundreds if not thousands of years, that is at risk of vanishing.Â The vast majority of plant species in the study were found to have medical properties described in just one indigenous language, many of which are themselves endangered.*
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> *In North America, for instance, the authors found waning indigenous languages held 86 percent of all unique knowledge on plant medicine. In the northwest Amazon, on the other hand, 100 percent of medicinal plant knowledge is restricted to languages on the edge of extinction.Â*