

## **A Green Angle on the Need for a Language Vault**

**Article by Jeff Justice**

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Communication is increasingly dominated by a few languages as the once vast diversity of human tongues is lost to economic change, technology, and environmental degradation. While the trend may be impossible to reverse entirely, governments and NGOs must advance steps to protect language as a key facet of human culture.

The September 2018 fire at the Museo Nacional do Brasil was tragic on many levels, with then- Brazilian President Michel Temer bemoaning the “incalculable” loss to human knowledge and culture. Funding cuts by the national government, coupled with a lack of water at the closest fire hydrants—one effect of those cuts—resulted in the near-total destruction of the former royal palace housing the museum and the artefacts it contained. One Brazilian columnist, Bernardo Mello Franco, termed the loss “[a] crime against our past and future generations.”

Among the losses were documents held by the Centre of Indigenous Languages that was housed within it. As of this writing, the museum and its associated offices are just now beginning to sift through the rubble to determine what survived and what was lost. However, the centre was the only place where spoken and written records of some now-extinct languages spoken were kept; the loss of those records mean that languages once spoken by peoples are now lost forever. And since, newly elected nationalist president Jair Bolsonaro has made clear his intentions to resume deforesting the Amazon region, and his party—and other like-minded parties—gained seats in both houses of the Brazilian Federal Congress. Expansion of logging will make a drastic and dangerous impact on the planet’s ability to rid itself of carbon dioxide, which goes without saying. In terms of human costs, it will also put further pressure on the indigenous peoples who live in that region in every aspect. Not only will continued logging threaten their homes and food sources, it will threaten their culture as they are forced to decide whether to remain or move into urbanised areas. As history shows from other forced migrations, the languages brought by those migrants into their new homes often decline markedly within a few generations.

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The centre’s destruction highlights the need to step up preservation and protection of human language, and this is not a novel idea. Several global consortiums and centres exist whose purposes are to ensure that our linguistic history is not lost. The Rosetta Project is one such effort, which now contains parallel texts of over 1000 languages etched microscopically onto disks. It was inspired by the Rosetta Stone, now on display at the British Museum, which enabled researchers to resurrect knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphics. Its stated mission includes preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity and ensuring that “no language vanishes without a trace.” This is where environmentalist and ecological arguments come to the forefront. Language preservation is not just about human culture but also about environmental preservation. It is about both environmental and social justice. It is a concern that environmentalists—Greens about the world—should and must address.

### **An example: the Svalbard Global Seed Vault**

The Nordic nations launched the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in 2006 with intent of compiling and preserving a comprehensive DNA collection of the world’s agricultural crops. The journal Science quoted then-Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg as saying that “It will contribute to ensuring our food security [and] protect our cultural heritage.” His statement emphasises two key points. The food security part is obvious; this project will work to ensure that crops endangered due to anthropocentric (or other) climate change are not lost to human need and could even be re-introduced at some future point. The cultural part is just as important; food is a central facet of

human culture. We have a biological need to sustain ourselves and human cultures throughout history and about the globe established rituals and practices surrounding the preparation and consumption of food.[1]

The Global Seed Vault is *primarily* intended for use should a global catastrophe wipe out our food supply. Climate change is but one of the threats our food sources face. Technology—which is very much behind climate change—poses another threat in the forms of cloning and genetically modified foods. Both of these issues also factor into the disappearance of human languages, and this is where an environmentalist argument applies to language conservation, not only in terms of how to go about it but also as to why it is important.

## **The plight of the world's 'minority' languages**

Languages struggle all over the globe for a wide variety of reasons, and many do become extinct due to natural causes. Others become endangered for socio-political reasons. For instance, the modern diminishment of Scottish Gaelic began when the British government outlawed it following the Jacobite Rebellion. The subsequent Highland Clearances caused many Gaelic-speaking families to uproot and re-settle in the cities. While the language had a community and publishing tradition for a while, the urban settings of Glasgow and Edinburgh—and the education system—were dominated by English, and the language's distribution shriveled greatly over time.

More recent examples of hostility toward a language include the Northern Irish Democratic Unionists' stated opposition to giving official status or support to Irish, and Spanish nationalists attacking Catalan as a language-of-instruction in schools, both before and following the failed Catalanian independence bid. Catalan had been previously banned outright, along with Basque, during Francisco Franco's 35-year dictatorship. Other times, opposition to minority languages is more subtle, such as that from UK Conservatives. They officially vote in favour of support for Scottish Gaelic in the Scottish Parliament, and their policy manifestos clearly do support it. However, the Scottish Social Attitudes survey shows that many Conservatives oppose it at a grassroots level. In a social justice sense, Greens have a duty to stand up for the rights of people to converse and express themselves as they see fit, but this is not the only reason to do so.

a lack of linguistic diversity impedes access to knowledge necessary to understanding the science behind biodiversity

The disappearance of human languages also assaults biodiversity generally and our global ecosystem. This argument would seem to be a *non sequitur* on the surface, but a critical holistic analysis shows they are connected indeed. Tatsuya Amano and William Sutherland pointed directly to diversity of language as an essential component of understanding biodiversity and conservation. This was not so much a matter of human diversity as a biological component—although this is a factor—as much as a lack of linguistic diversity impedes access to knowledge necessary to understanding the science behind biodiversity. While research shows that biodiversity records are more plentiful in areas where a higher concentration of English-speakers exist, among other factors such as high GDP, high biodiversity was *not* one of the factors present in those areas.[2] Indeed, language itself is a marker of global biodiversity health. Connections do exist between the extinction of plant and animal species and the extinction of humankind's languages.[3]

Technology is also an issue, but here it functions a double-edged sword. As an example, the internet is strongly dominated by the most commonly spoken languages in the world. Consequently, such languages push smaller 'minority' languages out of the way (presumably) in the name of keeping sites as accessible as possible to the greatest number of people possible. On the other hand, the internet provides a fantastic opportunity to preserve those minority languages by digitalising them and giving the world-at-large access to them.

## **Climate change and human language**

Plant and animal species come and go as a part of nature. Evolution plus extinction events are well-documented throughout Earth's geological history. Science now argues that anthropocentric activity has put us on the cusp of another extinction event. Governments and societies are already confronting the effects of anthropocentric climate change.

Recent migration from the Middle East to Europe is an early example of the challenges lying ahead. To be sure, many of those who migrated recently into Europe did so to escape war and violence that rendered their homes unliveable. Like the Scottish Highlanders who migrated from their farms to the cities, these new migrants brought with them their languages. However, research on migration also shows that it takes little time—especially in an urban setting—for their native languages to be dominated by or replaced by the language in use in the place to which they migrated. Should those migrants return home, that same evidence suggests that they will take their new language with them.[4] Since cities are where the bulk of employment opportunities and housing availability reside, not to mention easier access to governmental aid, we should expect those leaving their homes due to climate change to attempt to settle in urbanised areas. As an aside, once those migrants arrive in their new homes, they will be under significant social and political pressure to assimilate, and we already have ample evidence all about us of intolerance toward 'foreign' languages and cultures. The rise of populist parties throughout Europe is in no small part attributable to the increase in immigration, particularly from the Middle East.

## **Addressing language diversity and preservation**

Losing a language means losing access—likely permanently—to all knowledge it used to communicate. This is especially so if that language was the only medium in which anyone ever recorded that knowledge. Additionally, languages are intrinsically tied to cultures, and a language can well end up as the only surviving remnant of an extinct community. Even if a language should be rediscovered, if it is not recorded on its own Rosetta Stone, it may well become as unintelligible as the Voynich Manuscript, an illustrated volume from the early 15th Century written in an unknown and (so far) undecipherable script.

This is where institutions such as the Centre for Indigenous Languages in Brazil and the Rosetta Project become very important. In the case of the former and in light of its tragic destruction, questions arise as to whether the extinct languages it documented were also archived elsewhere, and if not, then why not? The purpose behind the Svalbard Global Seed Vault is to ensure that agri-plants are not lost to human knowledge or human need for consumption. The purpose behind the Rosetta Project is essentially the same for human language, the knowledge it contains in its own right and the additional knowledge it allows us to access. To be sure, it might not be practical to re-seed a language and return it to active, daily community use. However, knowledge of the language can still provide many benefits to humanity. Latin's continued existence and use, despite being a dead language, is proof positive of this.

One can only hope that the catastrophe against which the Svalbard Vault is designed to guard never comes to fruition. However, should it do so, the vault gives humanity at least a prayer of being able to feed itself in addition to maintaining aspects of its cultures which centre about food. In that same sense, consortium and efforts such as the Rosetta Project can enable us to preserve our cultures and knowledge through the words which represent them. Technology may well allow us to re-establish the crops held at Svalbard, and environmental and ecological re-wilding theories will guide us in re-establishing those crops. The same theories can guide us in preserving and possibly even re-establishing language communities. With respect to extinction of both flora and fauna, species extinction is already "widespread" according to one report, some 47 percent of species around the world have experienced a local extinction event, and this is expected to multiply over the course of the next century.[5] Conversely, the Rosetta Project predicts that *at least* 50 percent of the world's languages will disappear in the next 100 years. At minimum, species and language extinction appear correlated.

To this end, cultural ministries of governments, universities, non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders should step up their efforts to ensure that languages—particularly not only those which are endangered—are preserved in language vaults. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages provides a starting point for legal support for such a project, but this charter also allows signatory states a wide latitude in terms of what steps they take to preserve the rights of those languages and the communities that speak them. Those states whose constitutions specify an official state language may be bound by law *not* to provide support to indigenous, regional or minority languages if they are not mentioned therein. The European Union itself does promote multilingualism, but its official efforts focus on the national languages of its member states. Even then, the one place in the EU where one hears the smorgåsbord of national languages is the European Parliament. English, French, and German tend to dominate elsewhere simply because they are so commonly spoken and allow for immediate communication without need for translators or translation facilities.

Given the speed at which languages are disappearing, time is very much of the essence in order to preserve as much linguistic and cultural knowledge as possible.

Legal and governmental support needed to preserve minority languages, but institutions of all kinds also need to put those languages into practical daily use. Non-governmental institutions will play an important role in this, such as the Brazilian Centre for Indigenous Languages where these tongues can be preserved. The physical destruction of this centre highlights the need for redundant preservation methods. Given the speed at which languages are disappearing, time is very much of the essence in order to preserve as much linguistic and cultural knowledge as possible. The Rosetta Project made available for purchase copies of the disc on which it etched the languages it recorded.

This is but one means of preserving them, and it ought to go without saying that any archives created ought to be recorded using multiple means and then replicated. Another means to preserve such languages could come through “re-wilding” (in the bio-conservation sense) of those languages through establishing viable communities where those languages will be used daily. Formal use in parliaments and local governments is a starting point, but institutional use will only go so far to preserve them. As an example, Latin remained a language of official use in the Roman Catholic Church well after it ceased to be a language of daily communication throughout Europe. Languages, like other living things, do evolve with time, and death is a natural part of the life process. This does not mean that they have to become extinct. If we can preserve them as a means of communication, so much the better, but where such efforts cannot or will not succeed, we have a moral obligation to preserve the knowledge that those endangered languages contain so that they are not lost to the mists of time and eternity.

Reactions to the national museum fire in Rio de Janeiro included simultaneous feelings of grief and anger, much of the latter aimed at the Brazilian government for allowing the museum to fall into a state of disrepair and not ensuring the fire hydrants had sufficient water. The cultural loss is still being calculated yet is incalculable. Had the records of the extinct indigenous languages kept there been replicated and preserved in a language vault along the lines of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, our access to their knowledge would still exist. Social and natural science do show that a tie exists between ecosystem diversity and linguistic diversity. Letting the latter fail means the former will also fail. Environmentalists know of the dangers of losing ecosystem diversity. The dangers of loss of linguistic diversity should be equally clear, as should our moral duty to act in defence of both.

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