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Tribes Struggle to Keep Languages Alive

As population ages, the spoken word of Indian ancestors is beginning to die off

WASHINGTON — The Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians had to hire an outside linguist last year to help preschoolers learn the Luiseno language because the only native speakers left in the tribe were in their 70s and 80s.

"We can't use them as resources because they're too frail," said Gary DuBois, director of the Temecula tribe's cultural resources program. "We're running against time."

The Pechangas are spending \$200,000 from their casino profits to fund a preschool language-immersion program that they plan to expand into kindergarten, and perhaps to later grades. Fewer than 10 of the tribe's 1,500 members speak Luiseno.

The Pechangas' situation is typical for California tribes, said Leanne Hinton, chairwoman of the University of

California at Berkeley linguistics department. More than 85 native languages were once spoken in the Golden State. Today, 35 languages have no native speakers and each of the other 50 are only spoken by a handful, she said.

"Here in California we have 50 languages . . . almost all of them are spoken by people over 60," Hinton said. "As soon as the kids stop speaking it, essentially it's a dead language."

Many American Indians and educators worry that tribes throughout the nation are in a race against time to save their languages—a vital part of American Indian culture—before they die off with tribal elders. Consider:

A 1997 study by the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians found 3 percent of children under 6 could speak the language.

Only an estimated 2,000 Ojibwes, or Chippewas, out of

more than 100,000 in the United States speak the language.

About 80 percent of the nation's 175 existing Indian languages will disappear in the next generation if nothing is done because the vast majority of speakers are older than 60, according to one study.

But tribes are taking steps to revive their languages, with the help of funds from gambling or the government. Some tribes are spending their casino profits on preschools where children are immersed in their native tongue. And Senator Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, has sponsored a bill to provide more funds to language-immersion schools.

Language revitalization programs started in the 1970s in Hawaii, where the Aha Pūnana Leo language organization brought together preschoolers with island elders. The children then were moved into language-immersion schools. Members of the first senior class, who speak both Hawaiian and English, graduated in 1999.

FEDERAL FUNDS COULD HELP Inouye's bill would provide roughly \$10 million a year to help fund private school efforts to teach Indian languages.

1. **Aha Pūnana Leo** language revitalization organization in Hawaii. Its motto is "e Ola Ka Ōlelo Hawai'i," which means, "The Hawaiian language shall live." Modeled on successful programs begun by the Māori in New Zealand, the schools teach in Hawaiian. "Pūnana Leo" is Hawaiian for "nest of voices," or language nest.

and provide money for teacher training. Inouye has introduced similar legislation in previous congressional sessions that failed to pass.

Congress passed legislation in the early 1990s that funded language revitalization programs but these short-term grants leave programs in a constant hunt for funds, said Mary Hermes, an education professor at the University of Minnesota in Duluth. She also is a board member and parent at the Waadookodaading Ojibwe language-immersion school in Hayward, Wisconsin.

American Indians blame the government for eradicating their languages by pushing them off their lands, removing children to English-speaking boarding schools, and barring them from talking in school in their native tongue. Governments in New Zealand and Canada have acknowledged their roles in eradicating native languages and have provided funding to tribes, Hermes said.

"It is really the responsibility of the government that we're in this situation," Hermes said. "We're not asking for

money because of the harm suffered. We're asking for efforts to revitalize our language."

REASONS TO SAVE LANGUAGES

Cindy LaMarr heads Capitol Area Indian Resources, a nonprofit group in Sacramento that offers cultural and academic programs for area Indian youth. She believes bringing back the languages that American Indians have used for centuries to pass on their culture and history will give Indian children more confidence and a better education. LaMarr, president-elect of the National Indian Education Association, said few studies have been done on the relatively new language-immersion schools to back up her belief.

"To me, it's pretty much a no-brainer. If you feel good about your culture and identity, then you will feel better about yourself," LaMarr said. Her parents were taken from the Pit River reservation in northern California to boarding schools in Riverside and Carson City, Nevada.

"Language is essential to the continuance of our cultural and spiritual traditions and is an ac-

knowledge of our gift from the great creator," she said.

TORRES MARTINEZ IN THERMAL

California Indian groups might seek legislation to help fund language-immersion schools, she said, because the state's tribes have so few native speakers left.

Some California tribes have started master-apprentice programs where a native speaker teaches an instructor who then can teach classes. But those programs can be difficult, even when you're learning the language from your mother.

Faith Morreo, language program coordinator at the Torres Martinez tribe in Thermal, was part of a group that met with her mom, Tina, several times a week to learn Cahuilla. But it was difficult fitting the classes into daily life, Morreo said.

"We started out with a big group," she said, "but we got burned out."

The Torres Martinez tribe, which has 14 native speakers among its 600 members, hopes to start a day-care center next fall that will include some teaching of Cahuilla, she said.