

PLANTS MO PIPOL BLONG VANUATU

Story and photos courtesy of
Dr. K. David Harrison.

Vanuatu's WEALTH of languages

No place on earth has as many languages per capita as Vanuatu, with as many as 138 languages in a population of about 280,000. This includes some that are endangered and may disappear, and many that have not yet been scientifically studied. All this makes Vanuatu a Language Hotspot, an ideal place to encounter extreme language diversity, multilingualism, and traditional knowledge expressed in songs, stories, and place names.

I've been working as a professional linguist for over twenty years, at various sites around the globe, from Siberia to India, often working with last speakers of nearly extinct languages. But coming to Vanuatu in 2013 gave me a new appreciation for the wealth of knowledge found in local tongues such as Netwar, Futuna, Nafe, Raga, Mele (and over a hundred others).

Vanuatu also appealed to me as a place to meet people who easily navigate language barriers and communication channels in their daily lives, something that may appear effortless but is a high-level cognitive skill. Vanuatu's multilingual majority can fluently switch between Nafe, Raga, Bislama, English, French, etc. They express pride in their heritage languages, while valuing other tongues they learn through social contact or education. It is common in Vanuatu, but quite remarkable actually, to routinely meet people who speak six or seven languages.

The positive attitude that people in Vanuatu have towards their mother tongues



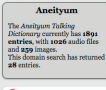









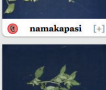
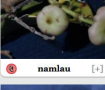
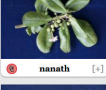
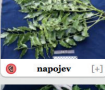

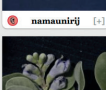
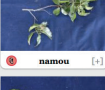
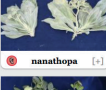
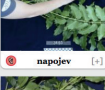


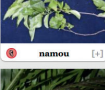
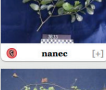
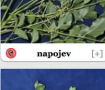






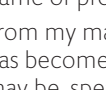
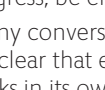
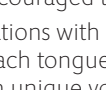
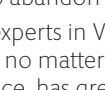
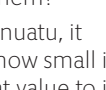
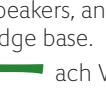
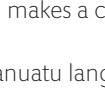
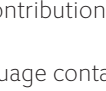
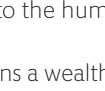
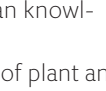
also sheds light on why maintaining a multitude of tongues matters. I have come to admire the determined efforts of many people—chiefs, teachers, language activists, fishermen, storytellers—towards ensuring the survival of their languages. Vanuatu's many languages are indeed a national treasure, and a legacy for future generations.

Vanuatu is uniquely poised to help answer some globally pressing questions. The world is now in a period of mass

extinction of languages, with nearly half of the estimated 7,000 tongues likely to vanish. Why are languages disappearing? Does language diversity matter? What is lost when small languages cease being spoken? Can't all the knowledge found in those languages simply be translated into global tongues? Wouldn't we all be better off if everybody just spoke English? Do people have a right to speak their mother tongues, while still learning global languages, or should they, in the

Aneityum ↔ **English**
 online talking dictionary
 version 12.2016

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name of progress, be encouraged to abandon them?
 From my many conversations with experts in Vanuatu, it has become clear that each tongue, no matter how small it may be, speaks in its own unique voice, has great value to its speakers, and makes a contribution to the human knowledge base.

Each Vanuatu language contains a wealth of plant and animal names, narratives about the uses of plants, marine ecosystems, climate indicators, and other knowledge systems that are highly adapted to the natural world. Conversations with fishermen in Futuna, for example, reveal that they not only can easily name hundreds of marine species, but have detailed knowledge of fish behavior, anatomy, life stages, and fishing techniques. What Futuna fishermen know about the ocean eco-system exceeds what scientists know. As keen observers, they are also sensitive to indicators of climate change that may have escaped scientific notice. Their knowledge is uniquely encoded in the Futuna language, such that it would be lost if they switched over to speaking only Bislama or English.

Looking at Vanuatu's rich biodiversity, botanists are finding that hundreds of plants still unknown to science are well known, named and described in local vernacular tongues. Examples include calendar plants—such as the sugar cane calendar of Aneityum—and many healing plants with medicinal properties known to people of Tanna Island. Vanuatu plant knowledge is uniquely encoded in local languages, through naming, taxonomies, plant-processing technologies, legends, and oral tradition. Such knowledge is structured in a language-specific fashion, and often cannot be effectively translated into any other language. Local languages are storehouses of taxonomies and environmental knowledge accumulated over generations. Each one reflects knowledge of traditional use and ecological practices, and information about the sustainable use of landscapes.

Ancient knowledge systems like the wind compass of Futuna—more than a dozen names for specific wind directions





blowing towards Futuna Island—enabled inter-Island navigation. On land, ancient stories are anchored to specific locations through the use of place names that denote mythical events at those sites. And the abundance of personal names, official titles and kinship terms define societies built on webs of complex relationships among people.


By approaching these local knowledge systems respectfully, we can appreciate the scientific and cultural knowledge that their speakers choose to share. Virtually all of this knowledge is orally transmitted, without the use of writing. This vast knowledge base is of immense value to Vanuatu's people, and they are working to conserve it. But it is eroding as indigenous languages are being displaced in favour of Bislama, English and French. What will the consequences be? In Vanuatu, there is an indispensable link between biodiversity, cultural practices (kastom), and indigenous languages. Traditional lifestyles depend on the natural resources of forest and marine habitats for food, lodging, clothing, medicines, and for traditional exchange and ceremonies. Customary stewardship of biodiversity resources has helped to maintain intact environments and cultures. Increasingly, however, people are confronted with a transition to a western-style, cash-based economy, and with that transition, losses of habitats, languages, and environmental knowledge is accelerating.

We are now in the fifth year of a collaboration between local communities of Tafea Province, the Vanuatu Department of Forestry, the New York Botanical Garden, and the Living Tongues Institute

for Endangered Languages. With funding from the National Science Foundation in the US, and the Christensen Fund, we are creating a comprehensive study of how people, plants, and languages are interconnected, and how they work together to create a resilient and sustainable environment. Culture, language, and plants all need a favourable habitat to thrive. This does not happen by itself, but can be created through thoughtful policy and community-based efforts, sometimes with invited participation by outsiders.

Our team in Vanuatu—local experts working alongside Botanists and Linguists from the United States—will contribute to the ongoing documentation of indigenous Vanuatu languages, along with the rich knowledge they contain regarding the plant diversity and its uses, management, and conservation—all contributing to an improvement in resilience and sustainability in the face of climate change.

As traditional names of plants and other organisms are forgotten, people know less and less about the individual species, their value, and the importance of their conservation. In our many conversations with community members, they have stated repeatedly that they would like to have their traditional resources identified and documented to help facilitate their preservation at the local level. Preserving information encoded in indigenous languages is thus closely linked to pre-















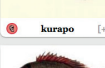


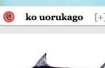









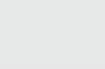


Futuna-Aniwa

English

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fish in Futuna-Aniwa			
Fish names recorded by Anaeleu Seru at the Futuna Fishing Cooperative in Mission Bay, Futuna, Vanuatu.			
			
kanai [+]	kurapo [+]	kurapo [+]	marari sega [+]
			
kanai [+]	ko [+]	kurapo [+]	mafe [+]
			
kanai [+]	ko uorukago [+]	kurapo [+]	mafe [+]
			
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kanai [+]	ko uorukago [+]	kurapo [+]	manini [+]
			
kanai [+]	ko uorukago [+]	kurapo [+]	marari sega [+]
			
kanai [+]	ko uorukago [+]	kurapo [+]	marari sega [+]

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servicing biodiversity, since people cannot conserve what they do not know. Vanuatu will benefit from the efforts of its own cultural leaders to conserve biodiversity and language diversity. And it will make a major contribution to global science and knowledge by sharing parts of its culture. This is cause for hope and optimism, amidst the ongoing global loss of species and languages.

Anthropologist and linguist David Harrison has been a National Geographic Fellow and co-director of the Society's Enduring Voices Project, documenting endangered languages and cultures around the world. He has done extensive fieldwork with indigenous communities from Siberia and Mongolia to Peru, India, and Australia. His global research is the subject of the acclaimed documentary film The Linguists, and his work has been featured in numerous publications including The New York Times, USA Today, and Science. David is both a professor of linguistics and associate provost for academic programs at Swarthmore College. He is currently working with communities in Tafea Province, Vanuatu, to create online "Talking Dictionaries" for Vanuatu languages.