

The race to save Indigenous languages

By Louisa Rebgetz

Posted Mon Feb 8, 2010 10:25am AEDT

Updated Mon Feb 8, 2010 10:34am AEDT

Experts are working hard to record several Top End Aboriginal languages that are down to their very last speakers.

In the remote Northern Territory community of Wadeye linguists say four languages will be gone in the next decade.

Patrick Palibu Nudjulu is a Magati Ke elder, custodian of the Rak Naniny clan and is one of two remaining speakers of the Magati Ke language.

His sick and elderly sister can speak Magati Ke, but not to the point where she can help in the documentation of the language.

Maree Klesch works closely with Mr Nudjulu through her job at the Endangered Languages Centre at Batchelor Institute for Indigenous tertiary education.

Ms Klesch said languages are dying in the community at the hands of the dominant Murrinhpatha language, which is used at the local school.

"Within 10 years certainly four of the languages we are currently working on with Wadeye probably won't be there and there are several reasons for that," she said.

"Languages may not be spoken in the home as much because of the lingua franca of the community."

In August last year, the Federal Government acknowledged a report which found 110 Indigenous languages are at risk of disappearing and committed \$9.3 million towards saving them.

Ms Klesch said the money has made a slight difference, but does not go anywhere near far enough.

"There is just not enough speakers left to document and record these languages," she said.

"Although there is Commonwealth support for this, it is not really nearly enough to be able to achieve the goals necessary to retrieve these languages and maintain them in a timeframe of those elders staying alive as first language speakers," she said.

Ms Klesch wants bilingual programs to continue in Northern Territory schools as a way of ensuring the preservation of languages and Indigenous culture.



Patrick Palibu Nudjulu, the last remaining speaker of the Magati Ke language. (Maree Klesch)

- [Map: Darwin 0800](#)
- [Related Story: Bilingual debate rages in NT](#)
- [Related Story: Garrett's \\$9m life raft for Indigenous languages](#)
- [Related Story: Expert blasts bilingual education changes](#)
- [Related Story: 'Language barriers' hinder NT literacy results](#)
- [Related Story: Bilingual education 'never given a chance'](#)

"You only have to look at those languages that are already extinct, and those languages that people are trying to retrieve to find out that without the language you just don't have the cultural knowledge.

"You don't have the scientific knowledge of medicine, the weather, how to manage the environment, all of that is lost in translation.

The outgoing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma put the preservation of Indigenous high on his list of issues of concern in his last address in January.

Tags: [indigenous-language](#), [australia](#), [nt](#), [darwin-0800](#), [wadeye-0822](#)