

## Asia-Pacific

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# Australian project hunts lost indigenous languages



Indigenous communities number under half a million in today's Australia

Librarians in Australia have launched a three-year project to rediscover lost indigenous languages.

The New South Wales State Library says fragments of many lost languages exist in papers left by early settlers.

Before British colonisation began there in 1788, around 250 aboriginal languages were spoken in Australia by an estimated one million people.

Only a few dozen languages remain and the communities number around 470,000 people in a nation of 22 million.

'Unrivalled' accounts

"A nation's oral and written language is the backbone to its culture," said the Arts Minister of New South Wales, George Souris.

"The preservation of the languages and dialects of our indigenous citizens is a very important project in this regard."

Noelle Nelson, the acting chief executive of Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto, which is backing the project, said the settlers' first-hand accounts at the State Library are "unrivalled".

"These first-hand accounts are often the only surviving records of many indigenous languages," Nelson told the AFP news agency.

"The project will introduce and reconnect people with indigenous culture."

An Australian government survey in 2004 found that only 145 indigenous languages were still spoken in Australia and that 110 of these were severely or critically endangered.