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Urgent Action Required for B.C.'S FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES

The First Peoples' Council has published a report that reveals the troubling state of B.C.'s First Nations languages. The *2010 Report on the Status of B.C. First Nations Languages* provides concrete data on the province's First Nations languages, including the numbers of speakers and resources for each language and the language revitalization work being done in this province.

The report found that fluent First Nations language speakers make up a small minority of the B.C. First Nations population. It also revealed that most fluent speakers are over 65, the number of semi-fluent speakers is small and the majority of classroom language teaching is usually insufficient to create enough new fluent speakers to revitalize a language.

"British Columbia is home to 60% of the indigenous languages in Canada and several distinct language families not found anywhere else in the world," says Dr. Lorna Williams, Chair of the Board at the First Peoples' Council and Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Learning. "The cultural and linguistic diversity of B.C. is a priceless treasure for all of humanity and this report shows that more must be done to protect it."

On the positive side, the report indicates that many semi-fluent speakers and the majority of language learners are under the age of 25, which points to the growth of

community-based language revitalization projects across the province.

KEY FINDINGS

The report recognizes that there are different ways to measure and define language endangerment. Given the diversity of B.C. languages, the report uses three variables to measure language endangerment in B.C.—speakers, usage and language resources.

SPEAKERS (measures the ages, numbers and percentage of speakers that speak First Nations languages)

- Fluent First Nations language speakers made up 5.1% of the reporting population and most of them are over the age of 65.

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Master-Apprentice team of Daisy Sewid-Smith and Pewi Alfred playing UNO in Kwak'wala



LEFT TO RIGHT: Master-Apprentice team of Leanne and Elizabeth Gravelle as they receive their two-year completion certificates from the First Peoples' Council; Participants at a Council-funded Language and Culture Camp.

“The cultural and linguistic diversity of B.C. is a priceless treasure for all of humanity and this report shows that more must be done to protect it.”

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- Those that reported as “semi-fluent” made up 8.2% of the reporting population. The level of fluency varies widely in the semi-fluent speaker group.
- Combined, fluent and semi-fluent speakers make up 13.3% of the First Nations population.
- 11.1% of the reporting population is learning a First Nations language. The level of education that these learners receive varies widely and is often insufficient to create new fluent speakers.

USAGE (where and how much the language is being spoken and taught)

- Typically, a student enrolled in a First Nations operated school spends one to four hours learning a First Nations language per week (excluding immersion schools).
- However, 34% of students attending a First Nations operated school or Head Start program reported that they are not learning a First Nations language.
- In the majority of communities, a First

Nations language is rarely spoken at home, at work or in the media.

LANGUAGE RESOURCES (the level of documentation, recordings, archives and curriculum materials for a language)

- 31% of communities have recordings of their languages available as a community resource.
- Although archiving is necessary for the survival of endangered languages, only 39% of communities reported having access to a FirstVoices archive for their language.
- 52% have curriculum materials for teaching their language.

“With this report, we now have concrete evidence of what we have known for some time: all First Nations languages in B.C. are in a critical state,” says Lorna. “I am encouraged by the many fantastic community-based language programs detailed in the report, but unfortunately, they are not enough to stem the loss. I sincerely hope this report is recognized as a call-to-action to save our languages before it is too late.”

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WHAT IS BEING DONE TO REVITALIZE B.C.'S FIRST NATIONS LANGUAGES?

Although the situation for First Nations languages in B.C. may seem bleak, there is considerable language revitalization work being done in the province.

Activities include:

Collaboration Communities are meeting to share ideas and resources as well as help each other overcome common challenges.

Creating new speakers Communities are participating in First Peoples' Council immersion programming such as the Master-Apprentice Program, Language and Culture Camps and Pre-School Language Nests to create new speakers.

Archiving Communities are recording, documenting and archiving their languages. Many are using FirstVoices.com, which is administered by the Council.

Mobilization and planning Communities are developing short-and long-term revitalization plans and are applying for funding regularly.

Traditional Project Brings COMMUNITY TOGETHER

Surrounded by friends and family members, Noeleen McQuary and her daughter, Chelsey ease the birchbark canoe that they and their community have built by hand into the Chooslto (Lake Ormond) for its maiden voyage. The launch ceremony is the culmination of a three-month project made possible through funding from the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council.

Noeleen, of the Nadleh Whu'ten First Nation, is a recent recipient of an Aboriginal Arts Development Award (AADA) offered through the Council. With a "Sharing Traditional Arts Across Generations" grant through the AADA, Noeleen organized and mentored youth on the Nadleh reserve outside of Vanderhoof in the collection of materials to build a birchbark canoe using traditional methods. They did not use power tools or nails and observed traditional protocol, giving thanks and tobacco to the land when they harvested materials.

"When at work, we would often think of our ancestors and how difficult this task must have been without the use of steel blades," Noeleen says. Despite the hard work, she says that the project was also a lot of fun. "The work site was often filled with laughter," she says.

As the canoe took shape, more and more people took notice of the project. The seven core canoe builders—including Noeleen, Chelsey, her husband, Lance and community youth who helped after school and during summer holidays—were joined by young and old from across the Nadleh reserve, including three Elders. Many came to watch; others came to ask questions. The most common question was: "Can I help?"

"Almost every family in Nadleh participated in some way. It was kind of a big deal," says Noeleen.

Noeleen is a master basket maker and recipient of a 2009 B.C. Creative Achieve-

ment Award for Aboriginal Art. Her baskets are made from birchbark and sewn together with spruce roots, much like a canoe.

Noeleen learned the intricate art of basket making from her grandmother and mother and completed her first basket at age eight. She lived in Toronto and Vancouver for many years, but returned to her home in Vanderhoof to be with her mother and learn the Dakelh (Carrier) language from her. She describes herself as "60% fluent" and taught Dakelh for four years at the Nechako Valley Secondary School before dedicating herself to art.

The canoe that Noeleen built with the grant from the First Peoples' Council is her second. She built her first canoe five years ago in her backyard.

"It turned out so-so, but the sense of accomplishment was incredible," she says. "I saw the AADA grant as the perfect opportunity to help youth connect with the land, strengthen their cultural identity and inspire them for future projects."

The launch of Noeleen's newest canoe was a particularly special event because it happened at a Council-funded Carrier Language and Culture Camp where she also works as a teacher. The launch of a traditionally made birchbark canoe was a unique and fitting activity at a camp that is designed to immerse participants in their language, traditional practices and art on the land.

FROM TOP: Jesse George and Noeleen look at how the ribs will go into the canoe; The canoe begins to take shape; Putting pitch on the canoe to make it watertight; The finished product is ready to be put in the water.



Language Immersion Programs FINISH SUCCESSFUL THREE-YEAR PILOT



ABOVE: Young learners with their supervisor and teacher at the Gllilas Waglisla Language Nest in Bella Bella B.C.; Participants at a Wet'suwet'en Language and Culture Camp; Representatives of USCLES at the Language Authority Conference, hosted by the First Peoples' Council.

Three years ago, the First Peoples' Council, with support from the New Relationship Trust and the Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, launched four new language programs. They are now entering the final year of their pilot run and we'd like to report on some of the projects and people that have made these programs so successful.

PRE-SCHOOL LANGUAGE NESTS

About: In Pre-school Language Nests, fluent Elders partner with fluent or semi-fluent teachers to immerse young children and their parents in their language and culture.

Language Nests are comfortable places that resemble a family home where pre-school children play, live and learn while their Elders and teachers speak to them solely in their First Nations language.

Meanwhile, the parents are given opportunities to learn the language and use it in their homes.

8:30 to 2:30 every day, 16 children under the age of six speak only Secwepemctsin, while taking part in cultural activities such as singing, drumming and storytelling or observing deer skinning, basket making or hide tanning.

"The children learned to communicate in Secwepemctsin over time. At first they learned basic commands and showed their understanding through their actions, which is always the first step," says Robert Matthew, Principal at the Chief Atahm School. "Later, the children started to use words, phrases and then began to speak in full sentences."

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE CAMPS

About: Language and Culture Camps gather people from across generations on the land to immerse themselves in their culture and language.

The camp-goers learn from Elders and fluent speakers, develop their language abilities, connect with their culture and build

"The children started to use words, phrases [in Secwepemctsin] and then began to speak in full sentences."

The program's success is based on two simple principles:

- Young children absorb language faster than any other age group
- Language and culture immersion is the most effective way to learn and understand a language

Success Story: The Chief Atahm Language School, located at Sexqeltqin (Adams Lake Reserve) in Chase, B.C. is famous for its language immersion programs, and its language nest has been a great success. From

community ties. These short, intensive camps leave people motivated to continue learning their language and culture.

Success Story: The Office of the Wet'suwet'en held three Language and Culture Camps in the summer of 2009—one for boys, one for girls and a third for boys *and* girls in the summer of 2009 at Moricetown and Poplar lakes. The children learned words and phrases and then participated in cultural activities based on what they had just learned.

For example, before they learned to



Images from the 2009 Wet'suwet'en Language and Culture camps.

“The children also learned how to guide a 15-person war canoe, identify local plants and prepare traditional meals.”

stretch moose hide, the boys learned words like *hida* (moose), *hida tsiy* (moose meat) and *hida ziz* (moose hide). The girls learned to say *Nit'ay his 'alh* (I am eating berries) and *ma, yin tinilk'l'n yin'alh* (yes, you can eat a strawberry) before they went berry picking. The children also learned how to guide a 15-person war canoe, identify local plants and prepare traditional meals (as well as the Wet'suwet'en words that went along with each activity).

LANGUAGE AUTHORITY AND LANGUAGE PLAN DEVELOPMENT

About: Language Authorities are made up of communities that speak the same language. While they may speak a different dialect or live far away from each other, they collaborate to make long-term language revitalization plans. They work to make the best use of the available resources in order to benefit each community equally, reviewing curriculum, creating new vocabulary and addressing orthography issues.

Success Story: In November 2009, the First Peoples' Council brought 50 repre-

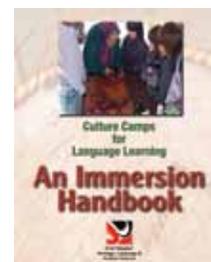
sentatives of each community/language to Vancouver for a two-day conference to give them opportunities for networking and capacity building.

In response to the most common recommendations the Language Authorities made in their year-two final reports, the First Peoples' Council hosted eight hands-on workshops, including digitally recording old audio tapes, recording and editing language recordings, and the eight steps to community language revitalization and planning.

Each group also gave a presentation about the challenges and successes they had experienced in their work to organize language preservation to include communities with differing dialects across vast geographical divides.

“It was really valuable hearing about the challenges other language administrators faced and how they were working to overcome them,” says one conference participant. “I liked everyone’s willingness to share ideas and support each other.”

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NEW HANDBOOK AVAILABLE FOR COMMUNITIES

The language program staff have created a new handbook to help communities plan and carry out their language and culture camps.

The handbook is a best practices guide based on past successful camps, community feedback and staff expertise. It maps out each step of the planning and implementation process, including creating a budget, planning culturally relevant activities and committing to 100% immersion.

To download a copy of *Culture Camps for Language Learning: an Immersion Handbook*, visit www.fphlcc.ca/language/publications.



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MASTER-APPRENTICE PROGRAM

About: The Master-Apprentice Program connects fluent language speakers with enthusiastic language learners. The master and apprentice teams set language learning goals and, over the three-year program, immerse themselves in activities related to that goal, speaking only their First Nations languages for at least 300 hours each year.

This program has produced spectacular results due to the commitment of the teams and the support they have received. It has created fluent adult speakers who are equipped to teach the language to others, including their students and children. The result will be a whole new generation of language speakers.

Success Story: In September 2009, the First Peoples' Council brought the Master-Apprentice teams together for training workshops with Dr. Suzanne Gessner, a linguist who works for the First Peoples' Council and Dr. Leanne Hinton, professor

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FirstVoices Undergoes MAJOR UPGRADES

FirstVoices, the online language archiving tool administered by the First Peoples' Council has recently undergone two major upgrades to better serve the First Nations communities that use it to archive their endangered languages.

The first upgrade is a new server for FirstVoices.com that makes the website faster, more accessible and easier to use.

The most significant changes to FirstVoices.com include:

- The language list is now organized according to language family rather than alphabetically, which makes it easier to list more than one dialect of a language.
- Every page can now be bookmarked and shared as a link, which means that all 368,000 pages on FirstVoices.com have a specific URL so you can return to any word, phrase or story without having to go through an entire language archive.
- The new FirstVoices server allows remote communities to cache FirstVoices.com on their community proxy servers, which means they won't have to load every page each time they visit their language archive. This upgrade will make the site much faster for communities in remote areas with slow internet connections.
- Enhanced keyboard technology, provided by Keyman Web, allows users to search and edit their archives using their language's alphabet.

The second upgrade is the expansion of the FirstVoices Language Tutor. The new Language Tutor allows communities to build intuitive lessons that mimic the way a child learns a language. Users are able to listen to a word or phrase, record themselves speaking and then compare the result with a recording of a fluent speaker.

A student tracking feature makes the FirstVoices Language Tutor ideal for classroom use. It monitors student progress through the lessons, noting how far along they are in their current unit, their rate of success and the amount of time they have spent on each lesson.



It is also completely customizable. Language teachers can build their lessons from scratch or edit pre-existing lesson templates. They can also incorporate their own photos, videos and audio recordings to reflect the community's language learning needs.

"This feature really contributes to learning," says Peter Brand, FirstVoices Coordinator. "Young students are thrilled to hear the voices of their relatives in their language lessons, or connect landmarks in their community to the vocabulary they are studying."

The FirstVoices Language Tutor had a prototype launch for 11 communities in October 2009. These communities tested the new system and developed lessons that became accessible to the public with the official launch of the Language Tutor at the ICT Summit in Vancouver in March 2010.

For more information, visit: www.firstvoices.com

Mapping Aboriginal ARTS AND CULTURE IN B.C.



BELOW: Participants created posters to introduce themselves and then mapped the movement and history of their ancestors at a recent cultural mapping session at the En'owkin Centre. LEFT: Participants drafted icons, and began plotting people, places, resources, organizations and events on a map.



Next on the horizon for the cultural mapping project is a living, online arts and culture map of B.C., which will be available in the coming year.

“Through a process of cultural mapping, a group can identify and create a multi-dimensional illustration of the ‘assets’ that make up the system within which their arts and culture live,” says Cathi Charles Wherry, Arts Program Coordinator at the First Peoples’ Council. “It might include people, resources, networks, places, events, or things that are less tangible—such as values or history.”

The Arts Program at the First Peoples’ Council has been conducting outreach workshops on cultural mapping since 2005. It offers artists and arts administrators

the chance to share their experiences and expertise, and identify resources.

The most recent mapping session was held in 2009 at the En’owkin Centre in Penticton, where 27 people gathered to build a living map of arts and culture in B.C.

The participants created posters to reflect who they are, what they do and who they work with.



URGENT ACTION REQUIRED

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INPUT FROM COMMUNITIES

The data used in the report was taken from a database of language needs assessments that are filled out by community organizations each time they apply for language funding from the First Peoples' Council. Through language needs assessments, communities identify language resources and projects in their communities as well as the gaps in these areas. Based on these assessments, communities can set their priorities and goals accordingly.

The First Peoples' Council urges communities to report any inaccuracies in the report by filling out a language needs assessment (<http://maps.fphlcc.ca/lna>) that will be added to the next version of the report.

Visit: www.fphlcc.ca to download the report

FIRST PEOPLES' news

Published by the First Peoples' Heritage, Language and Culture Council
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DESIGN Metaform

We wish to acknowledge the funders whose financial support has contributed to our success: Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation, New Relationship Trust, First Peoples' Cultural Foundation, BC Arts Council, Department of Canadian Heritage, Canada Council.



LANGUAGE IMMERSION

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emeritus at the University of California-Berkeley—and developer of the California Master-Apprentice Program on which the B.C. model is based.

“We’ve seen incredible progress from the Master-Apprentice teams in terms of fluency in their languages and their increased level of confidence in speaking their languages,” says Suzanne. “We’ve seen other spin-offs as well, with the teams sharing what they’ve learned with others in their communities.”

The training session was a great venue to assess what the Master Apprentice teams had accomplished over the past two years as well as the overall need for language immersion programs like it.

“The Master-Apprentice is something that filled a need,” says Clara Camille, a Secwepemctsin Master. “I was beginning to fear that our language was slowly disappearing, especially as each Elder is put into the ground.”

“Our language is our very way of life. Without it we have no tradition, no culture,” says Daisy Sewid-Smith, a Kwak’wala Master. “It means everything to us.”

WE’RE ONLINE

WEBSITE: WWW.FPHLCC.CA

FIRSTVOICES: WWW.FIRSTVOICES.COM

LANGUAGE MAP: [HTTP://MAPS.FPHLCC.CA](http://MAPS.FPHLCC.CA)

TWITTER: WWW.TWITTER.COM/FPHLCC

YOUTUBE: WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/FIRSTPEOPLES-COUNCIL

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FLICKR: WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/FIRSTPEOPLES-COUNCIL

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FACEBOOK: SEARCH FOR “THE FIRST PEOPLES’ HERITAGE, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE COUNCIL”



Board, Advisory and staff at the 2009 AGM in Haida Gwaii.

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