

Climate change takes toll on cultures

By Dylan Walsh, New York Times

There are nearly 7,000 known languages in the world today. It is predicted that half of these, in many cases vessels of indigenous cultures, will vanish over the next 50 years.

This has been much on the mind of Brigitte Baptiste, who took over this year as director of the Colombian Environment Ministry's Alexander von Humboldt Biological Resources Research Institute. Although rigorous assessments of indigenous vulnerability have been few and far between, she says, climate change is known to cause shifts in the growth of flora and fauna in local ecosystems, from animal migrations to natural cycles like pollination.

In some places, the shifts in ecosystems require indigenous cultures to rapidly adapt or perish as their traditional means of subsistence becomes harder to sustain.

For example, the Wayuu, who have lived for centuries in Colombia's arid northwest, depend on the glacially fed Rancheria River as well as two rainy seasons to support a culture rich in fishing and animal husbandry. But glacial retreat means that the river is often at lower levels than it used to be, and seasonal weather is becoming both less predictable and more violent.

Over longer arcs of time, Dr. Baptiste explained by e-mail, indigenous knowledge keeps pace with change, assuring the viability of the community. But in the case of rapid climate change, "if this adaptive capacity, already embedded in the fabric of local cultures, fails to give quick answers, the youngest members of the community may jump out of the tradition."

Many indigenous youths are already resettling in urban areas because of tribal displacement and the allure of rising economies, a phenomenon exemplified by the Nukak-Makú people of Colombia. Climate change will only compound the problem, Dr. Baptiste said.

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