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LEADERS & LETTERS

While threat facing the bald eagle lifts, languages remain in danger of extinction

From Mr Wilhelm K. Meya.

Sir, It was truly wonderful to read that America's national symbol, the bald eagle, is back in such strength that the US Fish and Wildlife Service is considering its removal from the endangered species list. In a way, the eagle's rescue symbolises our own redemption.

Nevertheless, there is a crisis today even greater than that recently averted danger by the bald eagle – that of our indigenous Native American languages, which are on the leading edge of a global wave of linguistic extinctions with 90 per cent of remaining languages expected to disappear within less than 100 years.

In the same ways that a healthy planet requires biological diversity, a healthy cultural world requires linguistic diversity. Yet, language is also an elaborate phenomenon tied to real people and cultures. Language loss threatens a fundamental human right – that of expression of the life and life ways of a people.

Each language relates ideas that can be expressed in that language and no other. Thus, when an indigenous community is no longer allowed to pray, sing, or tell stories in its language, it is denied a fundamental human right. Unfortunately, linguistic rights have been seriously abused for hundreds of years by banning specific languages and indirectly by assaulting language-support structures such as land, economies and religions.

Tragically, the denial of linguistic rights continues in the US in the form

of regulatory obstruction, fiscal neglect and racism. Even today, Native American schools are often forced to choose between basic funding and Native American language preservation. It is the modern continuation of the colonialism and abuse that originally denied the land to this country's original inhabitants.

Yet deliverance is not out of reach on this issue either. Consider for a moment that in the early 1960s, few Americans knew or cared that the bald eagle was on the verge of extinction in the lower 48 states. It took a few non-profit organisations and a massive direct mail campaign to inform the public about the plight. Fortunately, the national response was immediate and effective.

Within several years, new regulations like the Endangered Species Act were in place and financial resources were directed towards solving the problem. The eagles were on the road to recovery. But our success was long in coming. We cannot, however, be satisfied with this single victory. Languages today are the next frontier in setting the country into moral and environmental symmetry. We cannot simply save the eagle while neglecting our other important national symbols.

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