

Comment: Indigenous languages are central to culture and survival

GRAND CHIEF EDWARD JOHN (AKILE CH'OH) and TRACEY HERBERT / Times Colonist - <https://www.timescolonist.com/opinion/op-ed/comment-indigenous-languages-are-central-to-culture-and-survival-1.23641903>

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On Thursday, we celebrated International Mother Language Day to recognize the importance of language diversity worldwide.

This month, the B.C. government announced it would introduce historic legislation to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This follows an unprecedented \$50-million investment in Indigenous languages in last year's budget, and it aligns with the federal government's recent introduction of Bill C-91 — An Act Respecting Indigenous Languages. The United Nations has declared 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages.

Why, you might ask, all this focus on Indigenous languages?

The reason: Our languages are at the heart of our identity and important for our survival.

For Indigenous Peoples in Canada and worldwide, language is how we pass our traditional knowledge, culture and values from one generation to the next. Our languages embody our worldviews, our laws, our stories and our songs; they connect us with the land and our histories — who we are.

Research also suggests that restoring connections to Indigenous language and culture builds resilience and supports healthy individuals and communities. Being able to speak one's mother tongue plays a key role in lower rates of suicide and better education and employment outcomes among Indigenous people.

Despite their importance, Indigenous languages in B.C., in Canada and around the world are at risk of disappearing.

According to the UN, about 40 per cent of the estimated 6,700 languages worldwide are at risk; most of these are Indigenous languages. This is the case, too, with the majority of the 60 or so Indigenous languages in Canada, more than half of them in B.C.

In Canada, this devastating situation is a direct outcome of the government's role in trying to oppress, assimilate and de-unify Indigenous Peoples through the deliberate destruction of their languages and culture.

For decades, Indigenous children across the country were forced to attend residential schools away from their families, communities and territories. Under racist colonial policies, residential schools had explicit goals to “Christianize” and “civilize” Indigenous children, fulfilling the government directive of the time to “kill the Indian in the child.” Children at residential schools were shamed and punished for speaking their languages.

As a result, for Indigenous Peoples across this land, the natural process of passing down our languages and cultures in our families was forcibly disrupted for generations. Historians agree this was nothing less than a systemic, government-led effort to extinguish Indigenous voices.

First Nations, Inuit and Indigenous people in Canada have been pressuring the federal government to reverse the tide of these colonialist policies. We're finally getting to the point where the federal government is introducing legislation that can protect, rebuild and normalize Indigenous languages in this country.

Investment in Indigenous languages is a key strategy to address the hurt that travels intergenerationally through Indigenous families created by the residential-school experience. We have seen firsthand that opportunities to speak our languages strengthen us as individuals and as peoples, and heals broken hearts and broken relationships with our culture and identities.

In this International Year of Indigenous Languages, we invite all British Columbians to acknowledge and celebrate the original languages of this land.

Become familiar with the Indigenous language of your area. In B.C. and other parts of the country, people of all backgrounds are learning words and greetings from Indigenous languages. These are champions, practising the language out of respect for the local Indigenous peoples.

Supporting Indigenous Peoples in our efforts to strengthen and reclaim our cultural and linguistic rights will help create a great Canada that recognizes all of us — Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians — as equals.

Grand Chief Edward John (Akile Ch'oh) is hereditary chief of the Tl'azt'en Nation; a member of the First Nations Summit Task Group; co-chair of the 2019 United Nations International Year of Indigenous Languages; and a residential-school survivor. Tracey Herbert is a member of the St'uxwtews First Nation (Bonaparte Band) in the territory of the Secwepemc Tribe and chief executive officer of the First Peoples' Cultural Council.