

The Washington Post

Science Notebook

February 2, 2004

...

The Soviet Union never recognized central Siberia's Chulym as a distinct ethnic group, ignored the uniqueness of their language and refused to allow them to devise their own writing system. During decades of assimilation, they almost disappeared as a people.

Today's Russia has granted them status as an indigenous community, and last summer Swarthmore College linguist K. David Harrison recorded the Middle Chulym language for the first time.

"The language is essentially new to science," Harrison said in an interview from his Philadelphia home. "When we first went there, we didn't know whether there were any speakers left at all." The Chulym people are congregated in six isolated villages near central Siberia's Chulym river, Harrison said. The closest large city is Tomsk.

Harrison said the Chulym tribal council had registered 426 members, but of that number, only 46 were fluent Chulym speakers, and the youngest of these was 52. Chulym is thus a "moribund" language with no child speakers, probably destined to disappear.

"Some of the younger people have some passable knowledge of Chulym," Harrison said. "But Russian is the first language."

Harrison said the Chulym are an Asian people who traditionally lived as hunters, gatherers and fishermen. Middle Chulym, a Turkic language, has a rich vocabulary describing local medicinal plants, animal behavior and weather: "One of the things we're interested in is how specialized knowledge is embedded in a language," Harrison said. "All of that will be gone."

-- Guy Gugliotta

Copyright 2004 The Washington Post

Section: A Section

Page: A8

Copyright 2004 The Washington Post