

Enduring Voices field expedition to Siberia (Chulym River region)

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This “Enduring Voices”¹ expedition was devoted to documenting a nearly extinct language of central Siberia, called “Chulym” (also “Ös”). Chulym now has fewer than 10 fluent speakers. It lies within the Central Siberia Language Hotspot, contributing to the deep linguistic diversity and severe state of language endangerment of this high-priority hotspot.

The Chulym people were traditionally hunter-gatherers and fishers. Their livelihood, and also their name for themselves, derives from the Chulym River, which flows for over 1,000 miles in a westerly direction and empties into the Ob River. At first contact with Europeans, in the mid 18th century, the Chulym people lived in birch-bark teepees, wore fur clothing, had no domesticated animals other than dogs.

The Chulym watershed is a low-lying, marshy ecosystem with rich plant, insect, bird and mammal species and drastic seasonal fluctuations in temperature. Chulym culture, subsistence, and traditional knowledge center around river navigation and fishing, gathering of berries and roots, and hunting with snares and weapons. All Chulym knowledge systems are in decline: Use of medicinal plants has mostly been forgotten, as have the ecological (lunar) calendar systems, taxonomies of plants and fish, and techniques for making wooden dugout canoes, fur-covered skis, and fur clothing.

The Chulym people pose an interesting puzzle for genetics and the history of human migration. Descendants of an ancient local population, they are genetically and culturally kin to New World populations found in Alaska. At an unknown date in the past (possibly as late as the 18th century), they shifted from their ancient and unidentified language (likely belonging to Yeniseic, a now nearly extinct language family), and began speaking a Turkic language. Though they shifted languages, they kept many ancient place names (especially river names) as well as vocabulary specific to animal, plant, navigation, and canoe-building technologies. By digging into the Chulym language, scientists can gain insights into ancient Siberian prehistory, as well as an understanding of human adaptation to some of the harshest living conditions known to mankind.

All cultural, story and speech traditions of the Chulym people are in drastic decline and have been only scantily documented. Our work within the Enduring Voices project is to salvage, record and analyze the fragmented knowledge that remains. On this trip, our third to the region since 2003, we collected, recorded and translated a dozen new texts (stories, songs, and personal narratives) produced by V. M. Gabov, the youngest fluent speaker (age 57), and the only person who can write the language. We met and recorded Maria Tolbanova (born 1931), who was previously unnoticed by us and by the other remaining speakers. Maria has emerged as the oldest living and fluent female speaker who is able to tell stories. We visited Anna and Aleksei Baydashev, the only remaining married couple who speak the language daily at home. We found in a local archive a mythical tale that had been written down in 1971 by Russian researchers but never published, and we translated it. There are no longer any speakers who can tell such myths.

The Chulym speaker population continues to decline sharply. Six speakers we interviewed in 2003 and 2005 have passed away. Only three speakers remain who are able to work with us.

In 2009 we will publish a collection of the stories and wordlists we collected on this and previous expeditions, making them available both to scientists and to the Chulym community. We will also archive selected soundfiles, video recordings and texts on the Language Hotspots website.

¹ A joint project between National Geographic Mission Programs and the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages.



V. M. Gabov (born 1950), youngest fluent speaker of Chulym, talks with David Harrison on the banks of the Chulym River, June 2008.



Anna and Aleksei Baydashev (born 1943, 1940), the last remaining husband and wife pair who speak Chulym at home.



Zoya Skoblina and V. M. Gabov visit the grave of recently deceased speaker, hunter and Chulym storyteller Ivan Skoblin (1931-2007), who had worked with us in 2003 and 2005.



(left) Greg Anderson with Maria Tolbanova (born 1931) who recently emerged as the oldest female speaker who is able to tell stories. (right) The only surviving texts ever written in Chulym, by the hand of youngest fluent speaker V. M. Gabov (born 1950), who invented his own writing system.

