

Talking About: Connections between Language Diversity and Biodiversity

When researchers measure the greatest diversity in species and languages, they tend to correspond to the same geographic areas. In other words, in the 34 areas of the world that have been identified as biodiversity **hotspots** and additional high biodiversity wilderness areas, there is a strong correlation with the diversity of languages (Lamoreux 2006). In fact, 70 per cent of all languages spoken on Earth are found within these high biodiversity zones, including Melanesia, Central and South America, West Africa, and New Guinea. More than 2,000 of these languages are native to these regions (Gorenflo et al. 2012). The diversity of both species and languages is at risk.

Why should there be a correlation between biological and linguistic diversity? Reasons appear to vary based on the area. The first possible reason is ecological: highly diverse and plentiful areas contain a large number of cultural and linguistic groups within them who do not need to compete for the same

resources, and thus have a high degree of social distance. Another reason is based on the historical context: when Europeans expanded to all corners of the globe, they tended to settle in temperate climates, not tropical ones. Therefore, the tropical areas with high biodiversity remained less affected in species and linguistic diversity.

Identifying these zones of high linguistic and biodiversity can be important in developing plans to preserve them. Once identified, the use of Indigenous management practices helps preserve these areas and species. For instance, regions of the Amazon rainforest have many Indigenous populations as well as the highest rates of diverse native species. Unfortunately, there are few speakers left of the vast majority of these languages. Therefore, while conservationists support work to preserve the biodiversity of species in the rainforest, linguistic anthropologists support work among Native speakers to preserve the diversity of languages.