



WADE DAVIS

Our Ethnosphere at Risk

WADE DAVIS TALKS WITH *SHIFT* ASSOCIATE EDITOR VESELA SIMIC

THE LIVING UNIVERSE

“WHAT COULD POSSIBLY BE MORE LONELY THAN TO BE ENVELOPED IN SILENCE, to be the last person alive capable of speaking your native tongue, to have no means of communicating and no chance of telling the world of the wonders you once knew, the wisdom and knowledge that had been passed down through generations, distilled in the sounds and words of the elders?” asks Wade Davis, explorer-in-residence with the National Geographic Society. “This tragic fate is indeed the plight of someone somewhere roughly every two weeks,” Davis laments, and he should know. As an anthropologist and ethnobotanist, he has spent more than 25 years in the rain forests of Borneo and the Amazon, the mountains of Tibet and the southern Andes, the Canadian arctic and the wilderness of northern British Columbia, the deserts of North Africa and the swamps of the Orinoco, and in Haiti amidst the

Vodoun culture. His expeditions have brought him an intimate knowledge of sacred plants and indigenous cultures across the planet and aroused a passionate concern for the destruction of its ethnosphere.

Along with the eroding biosphere, warns Davis, we have an eroding ethnosphere, a term he coined and defines as our planet’s cultural web of life: “the sum total of all thoughts and dreams, myths, intuitions and inspirations brought into being by the human imagination since the dawn of consciousness. It is humanity’s greatest legacy, embodying everything we have produced as a curious and amazingly adaptive species.” The key indicator of the ethnosphere’s erosion is the alarming number of languages being lost. Not more than 50 years ago, 6,000 languages were spoken on Earth, but today fully half are not being taught to children. More than a vocabulary and a grammar, a language is the expression of a singular culture’s

soul. “Every language is an old-growth forest of the mind, a watershed of thought, an entire ecosystem of spiritual possibilities,” Davis reminds us. We are presently losing half of humanity’s intellectual and spiritual legacy, diminishing not only the myriad expressions and possibilities for human life but also our rich repertoire of evolutionary responses at a time when we most need humanity’s collective wisdom.

Although it would seem inevitable that history continue its course, with technology and modern life altering the ethnosphere today, Davis says this is not the case. “It is being destroyed by power—the crude face of domination, which has many faces.” Whether it assumes the expression of China’s domination of Tibet, petrochemical toxins poisoning the once-fertile soils of the Ogoni in the Niger Delta, or gold miners introducing foreign pathogens and epidemic disease to the Yanomami in the Orinoco, these kinds of overwhelming forces challenge a people beyond their capacity to adapt. “The issue is not keeping development away. These societies are perfectly capable of changing,” Davis explains. “The issue is about what we as a species need to do to find a way to move to a truly multicultural world where the spread of technology—beneficial technology, whether it’s medical technology or the Internet—need not imply the elimination of ethnicity. Culture gives meaning to a people’s lives. Too often the consequence of modernization has the effect of tearing people from their past. Whether through coercion or a people’s infatuation with the promise of the modern, the majority of those who sever their ties with their traditions will not attain the prosperity of the West but will join the legions of urban poor, trapped in squalor, struggling to survive. And when the people wake up to the realization that they aren’t going to be able to live as we do, often what happens is they feel disappointed and humiliated. And with humiliation, strange forces can emerge, extreme ideologies. Al Qaeda, the Maoists in Nepal, the Shining Path in Peru, the Khmer Rouge of Pol Pot—all these malevolent groups have emerged out of chaotic conditions of disintegration and disenfranchisement.”

Anthropology teaches us that the world into which we are born is just one model of reality. “Think of it this way,” says Davis. “Human beings as a recognizable social species have been around for perhaps 600,000 years. The Neolithic Revolution—which gave us agriculture and with it surplus, hierarchy, specialization, and sedentary life—occurred only 10,000 years ago. Modern industrial society is but 300 years old. This shallow history does not suggest to me that our way of life has all of the answers for

all of the challenges that confront us as a species in the coming millennia. ‘Extreme’ would be one word for a civilization that is destroying the very life supports of the planet. To place a value on what is being lost in the ethnosphere is impossible. The ecological and botanical knowledge of traditional peoples is but one example. Science has studied less than one percent of the world’s flora. Much of the fauna remains unknown. And how do you evaluate less concrete contributions? What is the value of diverse intuitions about the cosmos, the realms of the spirit, the meaning and practice of faith?”

But if we are the cause of cultural destruction, Davis reasons, we can also be the facilitators of cultural survival. “Consider how far we have come. Forty years ago, the environmental movement was nascent. A mere decade ago, scientists who warned of the greenhouse effect were dismissed as radicals. Today, it is those who question the existence and significance of climate change who occupy the lunatic fringe. Twenty years ago, biodiversity and biosphere were exotic terms, familiar only to a small number of earth scientists and ecologists. Today, these are household words understood and appreciated by schoolchildren. A single generation has witnessed a shift in perspective and awareness so fundamental that to look back is to recall a world of the blind. This alone represents a reorientation of human priorities that is both historic in its significance and profoundly hopeful in its promise.”

Davis believes that stories are one of the strongest catalysts for social change. To this end, he works with the National Geographic Society telling the stories of the ethnosphere to a worldwide audience of more than 250 million people; has published a book of photographs and travel reflections, *Light at the Edge of the World* (National Geographic Society, 2002), documenting remote regions and the unfamiliar peoples who have thrived there; and contributes to www.culturesontheedge.com, a Web site that also raises public awareness. Preserving the ethnosphere, the diversity of human spirit that has emerged and evolved on Earth, is an opportunity to rediscover the wonder and to realize the highest potential of our own species. 

