



Last Alaska language speaker dies

A woman believed to be the last native speaker of the Eyak language in the north-western US state of Alaska has died at the age of 89.

Marie Smith Jones was a champion of indigenous rights and conservation. She died at her home in Anchorage.

She helped the University of Alaska compile an Eyak dictionary, so that future generations would have the chance to resurrect it.

Nearly 20 other native Alaskan languages are at risk of disappearing.

Ms Jones is described by her family as a tiny chain smoking woman who was fiercely independent, says the BBC's Peter Bowes in Los Angeles.

"To the best of our knowledge, she was the last full-blooded Eyak alive," her daughter Bernice Galloway told the Associated Press news agency.

"She was a woman who faced incredible adversity in her life and overcame it. She was about as tenacious as you can get."

She believed passionately in preserving the Eyak language and wanted a written record of it to be kept so for future generations, our correspondent adds.

'Tragic mantle'

The Eyak ancestral homeland runs along almost 500km (300 miles) of the Gulf of Alaska.

" She was very much alone as the last speaker of Eyak "

Michael Krauss

University of Alaska Fairbanks professor

With her husband, a white Oregon fisherman, Ms Jones had nine children, seven of whom are still alive.

But none of them learned Eyak because they grew up at a time when it was considered wrong to speak anything but English, her daughter said.

According to Michael Krauss, a linguist and professor with whom she worked, "she was very much alone as the last speaker of Eyak" for the last 15 years.

"She understood as only someone in her unique position could, what it meant to be the last of her kind," Mr Krauss said.

"It's the first, but probably not the last, at the rate things are going, of the Alaska Native languages to go extinct. She understood what was at stake and its significance, and bore that tragic mantle with grace and dignity."

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/americas/7206411.stm>

Published: 2008/01/24 10:56:02 GMT

© BBC MMIX