Explorer Wade Davis on Vanishing Cultures

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National Geographic News

June 28, 2002

Wade Davis is an anthropologist and ethnobotanist who has traveled and lived among the people of traditional cultures in many countries.

An explorer-in-residence at the National Geographic Society, Davis has written nine books, made prize-winning TV programs and documentaries, and widely published his photographs. National Geographic has just issued Light at the Edge of the World, a book of photographs and essays documenting his journeys among vanishing cultures.

Davis and Chris Rainier, a photographer, have teamed up with two Web specialists to develop Cultures on the Edge, an online site to raise global awareness about threatened cultures around the world.

In a telephone interview, Davis talked with National Geographic News about his work and passions.

You're a passionate advocate of the need to ensure the survival of cultural diversity. Why does diversity matter, if nature and society are changing all the time anyway?

Just as there is a biological web of life, there is also a cultural and spiritual web of life—what we at the National Geographic have taken to calling the "ethnosphere." It's really the sum total of all the thoughts, beliefs, myths, and institutions brought into being by the human imagination. It is humanity's greatest legacy, embodying everything we have produced as a curious and amazingly adaptive species. The ethnosphere is as vital to our collective well-being as the biosphere. And just as the biosphere is being eroded, so is the ethnosphere—if anything, at a far greater rate.

Some people say: "What does it matter if these cultures fade away." The answer is simple. When asked the meaning of being human, all the diverse cultures of the world respond with 10,000 different voices. Distinct cultures represent unique visions of life itself, morally inspired and inherently right. And those different voices become part of the overall repertoire of humanity for coping with challenges confronting us in the future. As we drift toward a blandly amorphous, generic world, as cultures disappear and life becomes more uniform, we as a people and a species, and Earth itself, will be deeply impoverished.

You argue that the steady loss of languages, which are reportedly disappearing at a rate of one every two weeks, is an alarming indicator of declining cultures. What do languages represent that makes you so fiercely concerned about their demise?

Language isn't just a body of vocabulary or a set of grammatical rules; it's a flash of the human spirit, the vehicle through which the soul of each particular culture comes into the material world. When you and I were born there were 6,000 languages spoken on Earth. Now, fully half are not being taught to schoolchildren. Effectively, they're already dead unless something changes. What this means is that we are living through a period of time in which, within a single generation or two, by definition

half of humanity's cultural legacy is being lost in a single generation. Whereas cultures can lose their language and maintain some semblance of their former selves, in general, it's the beginning of a slippery slope towards assimilation and acculturation and, in some sense, annihilation.

You talk about the need to preserve traditional cultures, but preserve at what level? We can't really expect cultures not to change, mainly to satisfy our curiosity.

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This is a key point. There's a tendency for those of us in the dominant Western culture to view traditional people—even when we're sympathetic to their plight—as quaint and colorful, but reduced to the sidelines of history, while the real world, which of course is our world, continues moving forward. We see these societies as failed attempts at modernity, as if they're destined to fade away by some natural law, as if they can't cope with change. That's simply not true. Change is the one constant in history. All societies in all times and in all places constantly adapt to new possibilities for life. It's not change per se that threatens the integrity of the ethnosphere, nor is it technology. The Sioux Indian did not stop being a Sioux when he gave up a bow and arrow, any more than an American farmer stopped being an American when he gave up the horse and buggy.

It's neither change nor technology that threatens the integrity of the ethnosphere. It is power—the crude face of domination. In every instance, these societies are not failed attempts of modernity. They're not archaic, destined to fade away. They are dynamic, living, vital cultures that are being driven out of existence by identifiable external forces. Whether it is diseases that have come into the homeland of the Yanomami in Brazil, or the fact that the Ogoni in the Niger Delta find their once-fertile soils poisoned by effluent from the petroleum industry, or whether in Sarawak the forest homelands of the Penan have been destroyed, there is always an identifiable element. This is both discouraging and encouraging, for if human beings are agents of cultural destruction, we can also be facilitators of cultural survival.

In your new book you write: "Every culture is ethnocentric, fiercely loyal to its own interpretation of reality." Isn't it understandable, then, that we view the world through our own experience?

That's right. All societies are ethnocentric. We [Westerners] reflexively think of ourselves as the cutting edge of history. And if the measure of success is technological wizardry, we would no doubt come out on top. But if the criteria shifted, for example, to the capacity to thrive in a truly sustainable manner, the Western way of life would come up short. And consider for a moment how we might appear to someone looking at our culture from the outside. One thing we often forget is how the personal freedoms we cherish can appear to someone from another culture. We, for example, celebrate the individual at the expense of family and community. We take this for granted, forgetting that it represents a stunning innovation in human affairs—the sociological equivalent of the splitting of the atom. In most of the world, the community still prevails, for the destiny of the individual remains inextricably linked to the fate of the collective.

Thus, what we see as freedom may appear to another as chaos. Think for a moment about our social structure. An anthropologist looking at us from the outside would see a culture that reveres marriage,

yet allows half of its marriages to end in divorce; that admires its elderly, yet permits grandparents to live with grandchildren in only 6 percent of its households; that loves its children yet embraces a slogan—24/7—that implies total devotion to the workplace at the expense of family. By the age of 18, the average American child has spent two full years watching television and too little time with his parents.

Consider the manner in which we impact the natural world. Our technological sophistication is balanced by the embrace of an economic model of production and consumption that compromises the life supports of the planet. Extreme would be one word for a culture or civilization that does little to curtail industrial processes that threaten to transform the biochemistry of the atmosphere. This is not to say that we are wrong, but rather to suggest humbly that our way of life, brilliant and inspired in so many ways, is obviously not the paragon of humanity's potential. It is only one possibility. These other cultures are not failed attempts to be us; they are unique manifestations of the spirit—other options, other visions of life itself.

But most people seem to want to become more modernized. What's the answer, to reach a balance?

I think it's useful to step back and pass a critical eye on the whole notion of modernization and globalization. It's based on something of a false assumption: the idea that if the rest of the world follows the dictates of our development paradigm, they will achieve the level of material well-being that we enjoy. But as E.O. Wilson points out in his new book, that alone would take the resources of four Planet Earths to deliver. In other words, the reality is that these people have very little chance of achieving our level of material well-being.

One interesting thing to me is that the indices of development have no capability to measure quality of life. And too often the consequence of the development thrust or modernization has the effect of tearing people from their past, either through coercion or in many cases on their own volition, seduced by the allure of the modern. Torn from the past, they're propelled into an uncertain future, often in a very insecure place on the lowest economic ladder that goes nowhere. When the people wake up to the realization that they aren't going to be able to live like we do, or when they follow the dictates and fail to achieve a life better than they had known, often what happens is they feel disappointed and humiliated. With humiliation, strange forces can emerge, as we saw on 9/11.

How do we succeed in preserving traditional cultures in the face of inevitable development?

First of all, the issue is not keeping away development. No one is suggesting that these societies should be kept intact like museum pieces. On the contrary, these societies are perfectly capable of changing. The issue is not about us seeing what should happen to them; it's 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.

If we think about it, all of these questions are predicated on the assumption that these people want to be like us. The truth is, the Penan in Borneo do not want to be like us. What they do want is to have good medical attention and access to an easier way of life, of perhaps communicating with the world at large. But they don't want to stop being Penan. We need to recognize that this is a world in which we need to embrace a sense of interdependence between people.

I don’t have any illusions of how change happens, but I know that change does happen and it happens at a faster rate than we imagine, although it’s not as fast as we might like. What we can do is bear witness to the world as storytellers, and that’s what we are trying to do at the Geographic.