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## **At the heart of NAIDOC and culture: Languages Matter**

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples (Congress) reinforces the need for a sustained focus on the centrality of languages in strengthening cultural identity, in line with the 2017 theme of NAIDOC Week: 'Our Languages Matter'.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages possess a multifaceted and interconnected relationship with our cultures. It is the means through which Elders can pass on their knowledge about traditional customs, laws and values to future generations. A nation's language is unique to their relationship with Country and their ancestors, thus maintaining this bridge with one's heritage is integral to providing a certainty of identity.

Well-grounded knowledge of one's language or languages allows a strong sense of pride in one's culture and thus greatly contributes to the self-esteem of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals. Further, many studies have shown the benefits of psychological wellbeing to one's physical health, as well as assisting other areas in life such as education, crime prevention, and family and community relationships.

This year's NAIDOC theme raises the issue that Indigenous languages are becoming endangered. The number of different languages spoken during the onset of British settlement has declined from around 250 in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to only approximately 120 still spoken today. Recently released 2016 census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics also reveals that while Indigenous communities are growing at a faster rate than the wider population, the percentage of people speaking customary languages are declining in all categories.

It is integral to the preservation of culture and wellbeing that there are community initiatives and government support directed to the maintenance of traditional languages among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth.

Congress praises the work of groups such as the Miromaa Program, who provide training and educational programs within communities on the importance of languages, and the Australian Society for Indigenous Languages who work to conserve, document and distribute translations and materials in Indigenous languages.

As we enjoy NAIDOC Week as a time to celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander achievements and identity, let's also utilise this time to contemplate what more can be done to protect linguistic heritage— an indispensable element of our culture.

-ENDS-

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