

June 15

Less than four per cent of people in 24 southern Ontario native communities are fluent in their native tongue, according to a local native language council.

In a survey of 44,800 Iroquois and Anishnabe (Ojibwa) people in communities from Sarnia to Belleville, the Sweetgrass First Nations Language Council found that only 1,626 are able to communicate in their own language.

This is "a disturbing indicator that our oral cultural traits are on the road to certain extinction if we do not begin today to reverse this trend," said Amos Key, speaker for the language council and aboriginal language program director at the Woodland Cultural Centre.

A warning

The statistics are "an eerie warning to all First Nations in southern Ontario that they must make a decision now if they want to remain distinct as First Nations."

The language council has collected information on the number of native speakers since it was formed three years ago, said Mr. Key, but this is the first time it has released the data.

The percentage of speakers is decreasing and Mr. Key fears, that because of the age of many of the speakers, it will continue to do so.

The data shows that three-quarters of the speakers are over the age of 50 and less than one per cent are under 30. Children under the age of 10 were not included in the survey.

At Six Nations, only two per cent of the 16,400 band members are able to speak one or more native languages.

Three languages have all but disappeared from Six Nations. The Sweetgrass council couldn't find any community members fluent in Oneida or Tuscarora, and only one person, who is over the age of 70, speaks Seneca.

Of the 1,150 members of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, only one speaks Ojibwa.

The numbers are disturbing because language is a vital component of culture, said Mr. Key.

"We have to retain the language. It's such a pronounced characteristic of a group of

people. It's the first thing we are."

There is a philosophy of life within the languages and the speakers also perform songs and ceremonies which form an essential part of the philosophy.

Without the speakers, the ceremonies which greet and give thanks for each day, each season and each stage of life will disappear, he said. They cannot be translated into English.

Native communities are already setting up immersion programs and introducing native languages in the elementary schools, but Mr. Key would like to see more initiative on the local and national levels.

"I would suggest that each community take a stand publicly and say this community is officially bilingual."

He also supports the Assembly of First Nations' attempts to have aboriginal languages protected in the Canadian constitution or through federal legislation.

"Perhaps these statistics will forge a new partnership and spark more than lip-service support from all concerned," he said.

Charles Ross, a spokesman for the Ontario Native Affairs Directorate, said the province has taken steps to support native languages by making it mandatory for high schools to offer language classes if requested by 15 students.

Alfred Eli, a policy analyst for the Indian Affairs education department, said the government funds language programs in native communities which are largely focused on students.

Language consultants

It also supports four language consultants across the province. He anticipates there will be increasing demand for such services, but said limited resources will make it difficult to meet the demand.

The Sweetgrass language council, which includes representatives from a number of Ontario First Nations, tries to promote and protect native languages. It operates on an annual grant of approximately \$10,000 from the federal government.

First Nations

languages may

face extinction