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Etched language data will last for 2,000 years

Matthai Kuruwila, Chronicle Staff Writer
Wednesday, August 20, 2008

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Several Bay Area and national nonprofit groups that are seeking to preserve a record of languages unveiled on Tuesday five small glass spheres to highlight their efforts.

Micro-etched on a 2.8-inch-diameter disc inside each sphere were 15,000 pages of information detailing some 1,500 languages.

The groups say the Earth's languages are rapidly disappearing and they are concerned with the fragility of historical recordkeeping in a digital age.

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The information contained in the five spheres is expected to endure for at least 2,000 years, according to the **Rosetta** Project, which is a collaboration between the Long Now Foundation, the National Science Foundation, Stanford University Libraries and the National Science Digital Library to build the digital library of languages.

"We're standing now on the last generation of the majority of tribal languages in the world," said Alexander Rose, executive director of the Long Now Foundation, noting that an estimated 50 to 90 percent of the world's languages are expected to disappear within this century. "We're losing them so fast."

An earlier sphere of the same size, but with only 6,000 pages of material, was put on the European Space Agency's **Rosetta** spacecraft. Launched in 2004, it aims to land on a comet by 2014.

"The ESA wanted some kind of humanistic content on that mission," Rose said. "They liked the fact that we shared the name and that it spoke as many languages on Earth as possible."

The Long Now Foundation, based in San Francisco's Fort Mason, works on projects to "lengthen cultural attention span," believing that quick fixes for problems often worsen the situation.

"Hunger, environment, education - none of these can be solved in a four-year election cycle," Rose said. "If you take a longer view, some of these problems become tractable."

To learn more

For more information, visit www.rosettaproject.org or www.longnow.org.

E-mail Matthai Kuruwila at mkuruwila@sfchronicle.com.

This article appeared on page **B - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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Some future alien culture will use it as a juice cup for their kid until they bring it into the alien version of Antiques Road Show. "Oh, my! And I was using it for grape juice for my kid!"

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