

# Herald Special Feature

## Kimberley Language Centre at World Expo

By Siobhan Casson

**M**s June Oscar, Chairperson of the Kimberley Language Resource Centre - accompanied by Manager, Vicki Butters and Language Development Officer, Siobhan Casson - recently travelled to Japan. Ms Oscar was invited to talk at a conference organised by the Canadian Department of Heritage. The International Symposium on the World's Indigenous Languages was a small gathering, but there were representatives of Indigenous languages from all over the world. The Indigenous delegates came from Australia, Ecuador, Namibia, Botswana, Greenland, Canada, United States, New Zealand, Hawai'i, India, and Pakistan.

The conference took place at the World Expo 2005 in Aichi. It was held in the Canadian Pavilion on the World Expo site. However, it was not forgotten that Japan also has an Indigenous people, the Ainu. Mr Yupo Abe, an Ainu elder, opened and closed the conference every day with a traditional Ainu blessing. But he and the young Ainu people at the conference spoke of their sadness at not having a place in their country to keep their traditions alive.

The papers presented included Canadian and American government views of Aboriginal languages maintenance and an academic study of youth attitudes towards the Inuit heritage languages in the Inuit state of Nunavut. However, the most powerful talks came from the grass roots language activists from across the world.

The most striking factor was the similar struggle for Indigenous people the world over to maintain the right to speak their heritage languages and maintain their cultures. As in Australia, lack of understanding and tolerance creates prejudice against Indigenous people, whose goal is simply to hold on to something that is their rightful heritage. This theme ran through Ms Oscar's talk. She spoke about the need for Kimberley Aboriginal people to build their own capacity for language and cultural maintenance. She fears that without a change of approach from both educational and linguistic institutions the oral languages of the Kimberley, and the cultural knowledge contained in them, will become written resources on a library shelf.

The other Aboriginal Australian representative was Mr Kevin Lowe, the Educational Manager and Inspector with the NSW Office of the Board of Studies. Aboriginal people from NSW are working to revive their languages - often from written texts and very few recordings. His talk emphasised the drastic situation of NSW languages and so underlined the importance for Kimberley Aboriginal people to continue working to maintain their languages by passing them on to children in their spoken form.



Ms June Oscar makes her presentation



Some of the delegates at the conference



World Expo site - Canadian Pav where conference held