

GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES - PART OF OUR SOCIAL AND CULTURAL VALUES

Practical functions in our daily lives

Geographical names (or toponyms) are important for various reasons and form part of our social and cultural values.

- They provide words or phrases that identify places locally, nationally or worldwide, and give us an effective way of **communicating**. Toponyms help us find our way to places, to institutions, to friends – and so form part of the framework for organizing our surroundings. Responding to “Where are you going?” often involves a place name. If an accident happens or a fire breaks out and it is necessary to call the ambulance or the fire brigade, accurate geographical names play a decisive role. It is very important that the names are spelled according to the nationally accepted standardized forms. If the names are not used in a consistent way misunderstandings can occur.
- Geographical names constitute essential information on most kinds of maps – a nameless map is of little use to a traveler, a planner, a teacher, and so on. Likewise, it would be difficult to find one’s way without geographical names on road signs. It is true that road numbers, GPS and other electronic devices make it easier to navigate without access to geographical names, but in daily life most of us depend on such names. In short, geographical names are keys to **identifying specific places** and hence have definite locational association, often expressed in some form of geo-referenced system, such as latitude and longitude.
- It is fascinating to think that tens of thousands of geographical names in a region have been used and recorded over many generations (and sometimes many centuries) and represent a finely meshed net to identify features that surround us. For local people in a community, names of “**small**” features are as important as more well-known feature names at the national level. For a local farmer it may be important to communicate where his sheep are grazing or where animals of prey have been located.
- In using the web, we often query on geographical names to **access other knowledge**. Geographical names provide a way for us to access information on locations of botanical specimens, to check genealogical or historical records, to investigate data on climate change, to find hotels or restaurants, and so on. But are we looking for Hannover or Hanover? Are we looking for Sydney or Sidney? Is the name written as Saint John, St. John, or St. John’s? Can we search for Vienna or should we use Wien? The correct written form of a name can make all the difference!
- Geographical names are not only addresses or labels, they are also **irreplaceable cultural values** of vital significance to people’s sense of well-being. They are an important part of local identity and contribute to a sense of belonging. Geographical names constitute a part of the collective memory and heritage and so function as social identifiers.
- Geographical names may be said to constitute one aspect of human cultural heritage, in the sense that they have been handed down orally from generation to generation for hundreds or several thousands of years. In many cases, geographical names are the only surviving elements of extinct languages.



Photo: Helen Kerfoot

- When one considers that many geographical names have been coined as descriptions of the features or places in question, it becomes evident that we are dealing with material of immense historic value. Even more recent names, for instance, names of dwelling places, streets and fields, as well as of various topographic features, form a part of this **collective heritage and memory**.
- Thus **geographical names are living stories** that have come into existence at different periods of the past. They are compressed texts that tell something about the places they denote, and about those who gave the names. The place-name material of a local community comprises an incredible amount of historical detail. So every place-name is a message that today's generations should preserve and learn to understand.



Photo: Helen Kerfoot

Geographical names preservation

- Society must bear the responsibility for respecting geographical names heritage and assuring that name use and name planning are carried out in such a way as to ensure that the functionality of the body of place names is preserved and the **cultural heritage protected** in our rapidly changing society. Geographical names preservation is an important issue of concern to both laymen and experts. Increasing globalization offers the advantage of allowing a wider understanding of local names and heritage. However, in some cases today, local place names appear at risk from the imposition, through both local and global commercialization, of names introduced from outside languages and cultures.



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