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THIRD UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE  
STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

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Item 14 of the provisional agenda.

Policies, procedures and co-operative  
arrangements for the naming of  
features beyond a single sovereignty:

(c) Undersea features

REPORT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA ON  
PROGRAMMES FOR NAMING UNDERSEA FEATURES\*

Paper presented by the United States of America

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\* Prepared by Richard R. Randall, Executive Secretary of the United States Board on Geographic Names, June 1977.

Since 1972, the United States has continued to be active in standardizing names of undersea features for official purposes through the Board on Geographic Names (BGN) Advisory Committee on Undersea Features (ACUF).

In keeping with the growth of undersea exploration programs, much of which is related to efforts to locate natural resources, the committee has dedicated considerable time to processing new names proposed by scientists, technicians, and other persons involved with such efforts. Thanks to procedures developed by the committee, names proposed for newly discovered features are nearly always described on BGN proposal forms in adequate detail. Occasionally, further correspondence with the proponent of a name has been required to obtain additional information. Although names are processed as expeditiously as possible, normally from one to three months are required inasmuch as action by BGN (meeting as a separate body) and by the Secretary of the Interior is necessary. Proposers who have an urgent need for names, however, are given provisional approval as soon as the committee accepts a name.

During the period 1972-1977, the committee reviewed about 400 names, of which 340 were approved as new names, 35 were changed in terms of location or feature designation, and the rest were not accepted or were deferred. These actions were accomplished in 36 sessions of ACUF.

To ensure timely distribution of information about new names to users, the committee is designing an informal publication containing decisions about names which will be issued after names have been fully approved. In the past, the BGN Gazetteer

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on Undersea Features has been the main vehicle for publicizing new names, but budget restrictions have slowed publication programs. Eventually, a complete gazetteer on undersea names will be issued, but meantime the planned publication should satisfy requirements for up-to-date information.

In addition to working on names, the committee recently undertook a review of guidelines governing U.S. naming activities. This review, which was prompted in part by the requirement to develop standards useful for international programs (as enunciated by the UN Working Group on Undersea and Maritime Features), is now complete. The new statement of BGN principles and procedures is cited in full in the report submitted by the Convenor of the Working Group on Undersea and Maritime Features. As stated in that report, representatives of the United States and Canada worked on the statement in an attempt to assure maximum adherence to previous statements adopted by those nations.

Another matter occupying the attention of the United States is that of terms and definitions of undersea features. The basic principle followed by BGN is that terms to describe features should be as simple as possible and related to form rather than genetic process. At the same time, the definitions also should be simple and descriptive of form. For many years, these principles have been followed by BGN; they are fully elaborated in the text of the 1972 BGN Gazetteer on Undersea Features. The distinction between form versus genesis as the BGN basis for terms and definitions perhaps requires discussion. Surveys of undersea areas that result in the identification of physical features almost always deliver data that indicate location, form, and size. When new features are thus "discovered," and when a name is proposed, researchers are urged to submit appropriate information on the BGN names proposal form. The form, which also is recommended to the Working Group on Undersea and Maritime Features for international use, asks for adequate information to assure proper identification of the features. In very few cases would such surveys also provide information about the genesis of features, and in view of the requirement to attach names to features for publication purposes, waiting for further geologic evidence would be counterproductive. For this reason,

ACUF recently reaffirmed its position against including reference to genetic factors as part of feature identification.

The great amount of new bathymetric information available to scientists and cartographers does, however, require that present terms and definitions be reviewed to test their validity. Terms and definitions used by other nations, notably Canada, were studied as part of the review, and in many cases Canadian versions were adopted by ACUF. A few new or modified terms were also added to the existing BGN list; this list is included in the report of the Working Group identified earlier. Changes and additions were made to clarify terms or definitions and to improve their utility.

The U.S. is involved in yet another kind of review. The increasingly large scale of undersea surveying, particularly on the U.S. continental shelf, has resulted in a corresponding increase in identification of new kinds of "micro-features." Although many of these features may resemble features found in deeper water, their occurrence in groups and their smaller sizes produces a requirement to view them as a different category of features. Further, some micro-features appear to be different in nature from those in deep water. The committee is examining the evidence to determine whether a new set of terms and definitions is required.

With a foreseeable growth in the number of terms and definitions, the committee anticipates that persons either working on studies of features or proposing new names will have some difficulty in differentiating the various kinds of features. Already, ambiguity can arise where current definitions do not permit precise identification of feature types. The committee is giving consideration to preparing graphic illustrations to provide clear characterizations of all feature types. Such illustrations would include perspective sketches and sets of bathymetric contours. The availability of such pictures would materially assist in the translation of terms and definitions into other languages.