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STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES  
Athens, 17 August-7 September 1977  
Item 16 of the provisional agenda.  
International co-operation:  
(e) Co-operation with international  
organizations

WORK OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA IN THE COMMITTEE ON  
GEOGRAPHICAL TERMINOLOGY OF THE PAN-AMERICAN INSTITUTE  
OF GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY\*

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.

The United States continues to work with the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH), an organization comprising 22 countries of the Western Hemisphere that has been active since the second decade of this century in programs related to geography and history of the concerned areas. Since 1941, PAIGH programs have been expanded to include cartography, geodesy, and geophysics.

In partnership with other PAIGH nations, the U.S. has played various roles in helping organize and administer international programs in all subject fields. These roles have included key positions within the four major commissions—Geography, History, Cartography, and Geophysics—and within committees and working groups subordinate to the commissions.

At the 9th General Assembly of PAIGH, held in Panama in April and May of 1973, authorities acted to establish a Committee on Geographical Terminology. This committee was an outgrowth of a previously existing Working Group on Geographical Terminology, and assumed many of the tasks assigned the former body. So as to clarify its relationship with the United Nations, which has similar interests for the hemisphere, the committee charter stated that its work was to be developed in close coordination with pertinent UN programs. The charter also made clear that the focus of the committee was on terminology rather than on names.

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In Panama, Dr. Richard R. Randall, Executive Secretary of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, was appointed as president of the committee for the next four years, or until the next General Assembly, now scheduled to take place in Quito, Ecuador, in August of 1977. At a meeting of committee representatives from Central America in March 1974, further work programs were developed; later correspondence with members in other PAIGH nations informed them of committee projects, and served to secure overall consensus. Although "geographical terminology" is a broad subject, and one capable of elaboration in many directions, the committee agreed to limit its focus, at least initially, to a few specific areas. Accordingly, two major tasks were defined: the compilation of agencies in the Americas engaging in the processing of geographic names, and the translation and publication of a document entitled "Generic Terms Used in Geographic Names in America South of the United States and in the Iberian Peninsula." \* (This document was described in Technical Papers, Vol. II, Second United Nations Conference on Geographical Names, London 10-31 May 1972 (E/CONF.61/4/Add.1)).

Seeing a need for strengthening communications with members in PAIGH countries, Dr. Randall took a 19-day trip to Central and South America in November and December of 1975, during which time programs were discussed and ideas for future projects were outlined. The trip was most valuable for the insight it gave the president to the points of view held by committee members (and others interested in geographical terminology); the trip also enabled members to grasp a new feeling of identification with committee goals and programs. As a result of the exposure, certain aspects of the committee's work were clarified and new perspectives gained. Two major concerns manifested themselves. First, there was some feeling that terminology should be pursued as a field separate from geographical names. This is a view in some areas where a geographic name consists only of what generally has been defined as the "specific element." In this view, terminology is seen as a function of physical features, and represents nomenclature applied to features independent of identifying appellations. In certain respects, this view holds that

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\* The Iberian Peninsula is included because of close linguistic relationships with Latin America.

terminology should be tied to lexical meanings. Discussions with committee members were useful in elaborating opinions on this subject, and helping to develop a greater degree of unity about the subject.

The second major concern was that the committee might be overlapping the field of geographic names, an area already covered by UN programs. Discussions on this topic were helpful in determining that although geographical terminology necessarily was closely related to geographical names, there was no deliberate effort to be concerned with names per se. Further, the discussions helped illuminate the two-fold nature of geographical terminology—they could be studied as separate phenomena, yet they held no particular significance to the committee unless they were studied principally as parts of geographical names. In both regards the committee program takes into account various UN documents of the 1972 conference.

With these problems receiving further illumination through personal and written communications, the programs of the committee were approached with renewed interest. The first item on the agenda, a directory of agencies concerned with geographic names, is nearing completion. The purpose of the directory is to provide a reference for PAIGH members that indicates which nations are engaging in names work (and, presumably, terminology work, too). The evident emphasis on names is immaterial, since in no case is there an independent agency that is concerned with terminology, and since, on the other hand, all names agencies are concerned with terminology. In addition to providing a useful guide to names-standardizing agencies, the document also can indicate, for those nations having an interest, which countries are engaging in various kinds of work. The ultimate goals are to encourage greater uniformity throughout the Americas in processing terminology associated with names, and to promote a free exchange of information regarding terminology. In any case, the directory is seen as only a first step in organizing other phases of committee work.

The document cited earlier, "Generic Terms Used in Geographic Names in America South of the United States and in the Iberian Peninsula," is now being revised as a result of views that the item should include terms contributed by member

nations. Although the original item reflected terms appearing on official maps produced by the countries covered, the members believed that additional terms should be added, and that errors should be corrected. This change will cause some delay in original publication plans while individual members accomplish the research to obtain desired terms or to remedy errors.

The aim of the document is to show the variations of meanings given to single geographic (or generic) terms as employed in the countries covered. For example, the word "río" can have such meanings as anabranch, channel, distributary, drainage ditch, estuary, intermittent stream, lagoon, marine channel, stream, stream channel, stream mouth, stream section, and tidal creek. These interpretations are derived from actual cartographic evidence, and are not necessarily tied to a dictionary meaning. By showing such variations, the item may aid map and chart users who puzzle over the application of terms to unfamiliar features. Finally, the document may also encourage national cartographic agencies to develop standards for treating terminology.

The committee contemplates additional tasks. Under committee guidance each country could prepare a national glossary of terms to show the wide variety of meanings given to terms. Articles concerning research on the subject could be published in the Revista Cartografica, a periodical of the Geography Commission. The problem of native or unwritten languages needs to be probed; here preservation of terminology, both individually and as part of names, is a goal.

The United States is supporting committee programs in Latin America through the offices of the Inter American Geodetic Survey (IAGS). Already established to assist many countries in Central and South America in cooperative mapping programs, IAGS has been of material aid in supplementing communications with committee members, and in clarifying committee intentions.

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