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Report on Activities in Canada

Submitted by Canada**

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Report on Activities in Canada

Geographical Names Board of Canada

SUMMARY

The Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) has made significant advances in revitalizing and enhancing collaboration between Canada's federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities. Since 2013, the activities of the GNBC have been focussed on developing, refining, and now implementing an ambitious, forward-looking five-year Strategic Plan.

The GNBC Strategic Plan includes several key objectives, including: enhanced effectiveness of the Board through renewed governance; improved functionality of the national geographical names database through interoperability; improved Indigenous naming policies and partnerships; a renewed national policy for undersea and maritime feature naming; and increased awareness of the importance of authoritative geographical names. Since the adoption of the Strategic Plan, several Working Groups composed of GNBC members have been actively meeting to implement the objectives outlined in the Plan.

Background

The Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) is the national coordinating body responsible for standards and policies for geographical names in Canada. The Board is established under a federal Order-in-Council, and is comprised of members from federal, provincial and territorial government departments and agencies, each with specific responsibilities for their respective jurisdictions and mandates. Working together as a multi-jurisdictional national body, GNBC members coordinate efforts to ensure that geographical names are consistently managed in Canada. The GNBC was initially established as the Geographic Board of Canada in 1897, and celebrates its 120th anniversary in 2017.

The Minister of Natural Resources Canada is responsible for appointing the Chairperson of the GNBC. The current Chairperson, Ms. Connie Wyatt Anderson of The Pas, Manitoba, was appointed to a five-year term in May 2015. Ms. Wyatt Anderson is a teacher in the community of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, and has received national recognition as a history and geography educator.

The GNBC is supported by a Secretariat provided by Natural Resources Canada (NRCan), a department of the Government of Canada. NRCan provides infrastructure and support for the Canadian Geographical Names Data Base (CGNDB), the national database of authoritative geographical names and a key component of Canada's Spatial Data Infrastructure. NRCan consolidates geographical names data, spatial delineations of features, and naming decisions provided by the naming authorities of the GNBC in the CGNDB.

The GNBC accomplishes its mandate as Canada's national naming authority by: developing policies and standards for the treatment of geographical names and toponymic terminology; coordinating geographical naming activities in Canada; promoting the use of official names; and representing Canada in international toponymic forums. The GNBC meets in plenary session once each calendar year, providing a national forum to exchange knowledge, discuss issues, and make decisions on toponymic matters.

Smaller working groups and advisory committees composed of GNBC members address specific topics or areas of work and develop policies or initiatives to be considered and implemented by the Board.

Geographical Naming Authorities

Generally in Canada, the authority to officially name geographical features rests with the 13 provincial and territorial governments. Each province and territory has established procedures to investigate naming proposals for geographical features situated within its area of jurisdiction. Naming proposals involve extensive research by the jurisdictional authority and consultation with inhabitants of the region to confirm that proposed names are used and supported by the local community. The naming jurisdictions in Canada have developed standardized national guidelines (*Principles and Procedures for Geographical Naming*), endorsed and adopted by the GNBC in 2011.

Several provincial and territorial jurisdictions appoint a naming board to review and recommend naming proposals, while other jurisdictions appoint a government official with expertise in toponymy. In most jurisdictions, recommendations for naming decisions are submitted for approval to a provincial or territorial Minister with legislated responsibility for geographical names. In all cases, once names are approved by a responsible jurisdictional authority, they are recognized and endorsed as official decisions of the GNBC.

On federally-administered lands and waters, naming decisions are made in collaboration by both the provincial or territorial authority and the appropriate federal authority. Federal departments involved in geographical naming include those responsible for undersea features and lands such as national parks, Indian reserves, and military establishments.

Renewed GNBC Strategic Plan

In 2013, members of the GNBC were asked to respond to a survey to determine the significant issues that needed to be addressed by the GNBC community in order to develop renewed strategic long-term planning goals. The GNBC's Strategic Plan had last been updated in 2006, and opportunities were identified for review and modernization of the Board with respect to policies, procedures, and engagement with stakeholders. New technologies and rising stakeholder expectations, combined with aging internal processes and shrinking resources highlighted the need for a comprehensive review of GNBC operations. In parallel, NRCan undertook a review of internal policies and procedures supporting the GNBC, with an eye to developing a streamlined and consistent national geographical name processing workflow. The survey of GNBC members was followed in 2014 by a facilitated workshop to further discuss, develop and refine a forward-looking Strategic Plan to guide the activities of the GNBC for the upcoming five years. In particular, inter-jurisdictional exchanges of information and collaborative problem-solving were identified as necessary to achieve innovative solutions.

The Strategic Plan was officially adopted by the Board at the 2014 Annual Meeting in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The plan describes the GNBC priorities in an accountable and transparent way for the period 2014-2020. Performance measures indicate how the GNBC will monitor and evaluate progress toward achieving the outcomes identified in the plan. Each strategic objective outlined in the plan is intended to strengthen the effectiveness of GNBC operations, refine policies and procedures, and encourage the use, exchange and promotion of authoritative geographical names.

The GNBC Strategic Plan focusses on five key overarching objectives:

1. Enhancing the effectiveness of the national naming authority,
2. Maintaining the authoritative national geographical names database,
3. Improving Indigenous geographical naming policies,
4. Establishing a national process for undersea feature naming,
5. Raising awareness of the importance of authoritative geographical names.

Implementation of these objectives is well underway through several active working groups and an advisory committee, each focussed on specific priority actions outlined in the Strategic Plan. Each group is comprised of federal, provincial and territorial members of the GNBC, supported by the GNBC Secretariat. The working groups and advisory committee meet regularly throughout the year, typically via videoconference, and report on activities and accomplishments at the Annual Meeting.

Aligned with implementation of the Strategic Plan, the GNBC Secretariat within Natural Resources Canada undertook efforts to review and modernize operations to more efficiently and effectively support the needs of GNBC members. Coordination of the exchange of information between the various federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities constitutes a significant component of implementing the Strategic Plan.

The overarching objectives of the Strategic Plan are discussed below.

Enhancing the effectiveness of the national naming authority

Improving the manner in which the GNBC carries out its mandate, with particular attention to efficient and effective methods of operation and clearly defined roles and responsibilities was identified as a key objective of the Strategic Plan. A working group was established to review the governance of the Board, including its rules of procedure and methods of operation, membership, voting, and the role of advisory committees and working groups. The GNBC's Governance Working Group has produced a comprehensive *Governance and Operations Manual* to ensure the GNBC is operating efficiently and effectively, is sufficiently resourced, and that its mandate and strategic priorities are understood.

In addition to enhanced governance, improving the thoroughness, timeliness and accessibility of research and policy analysis was identified as a component of enhancing the effectiveness of the GNBC. All jurisdictions share in the benefits of better decision-making through sound research and policy analysis, leading to better accessibility of information about standards, best practices, tools and procedures. To enable the exchange of information between the jurisdictions of the GNBC, in 2015 a web-based document sharing site was established for exchanging research materials. Information about research results and guidelines is collected, organized and available digitally to members.

A national digitization strategy for GNBC materials was initiated in 2015, in particular to scan the extensive repository of Canada's official naming decisions and related documentation. The GNBC Secretariat maintains an historical collection of records that chart the toponymic history of Canada since 1897, including letters, documents and maps. This irreplaceable historical collection of documents was relocated to a secure climate-controlled facility, and is now being incrementally scanned to ensure the records are preserved. Scanning these documents will serve two purposes: preservation of the hard copy version for the long term by avoiding further handling, and making the documents broadly accessible to the research community and general public via a Government of Canada open data portal.

In 2016, NRCan supported the on-line release of *CANOMA*, a toponymic research periodical published from 1975 until 2001. A total of 27 volumes containing over 700 articles about geographical naming have been digitized for distribution via [GEOSCAN](#), the bibliographic database for scientific publications of NRCan. Dissemination through GEOSCAN also ensures the content is indexed by Google and other search engines. Additionally, new toponymic research activities have been initiated. In early 2017, the GNBC Secretariat commissioned a policy scan to report on Indigenous naming policies of Canadian naming authorities.

The GNBC Strategic Plan also recognizes the importance of international activities related to geographical naming. Involvement with international naming bodies contributes to several of the strategic objectives, by fostering standardization, facilitating the sharing of best practices, and providing a forum for exchange of ideas. A key component of that involvement is participation in UNGEGN sessions and United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names.

Maintaining the authoritative national geographical names database

A central role of GNBC naming authorities is the gathering and dissemination of accurate information on the location, delineation and origins of Canada's geographical names. This is accomplished by careful management of databases in individual jurisdictions, and contribution of that data to the national repository of geographical names, the Canadian Geographical Names Database (CGNDB). Open data sharing and exchange and accessing expertise in the wider geospatial community are opportunities to acquire robust geographical names information. Ongoing effort is needed to facilitate the exchange of data, maintain the data closest to source, and ensure data are interoperable between databases in accordance with open data models adopted across many levels of government.

In 2015, the CGNDB underwent a fundamental transition to a more efficient and interoperable geospatial-based data model. Alongside this effort, the NRCan developed a more consistent approach to geographical names decision processing, and implemented various improvements for handling and exchanging data. Efficiencies were achieved through a review of internal processes, the development of a new web-based application, and standardization and automation of validation processes wherever possible.

To support the development of the new data model for the CGNDB, and to facilitate queries, edits and updates by GNBC members, NRCan also updated a web-based application called GNApp-II. The new application was launched in February 2016, and supports improved interaction by the GNBC members directly with the national database. The new application was developed with the input of the members through extensive requirements gathering and usability testing. The application has improved display and searching functionality, as well as providing a map visualizer. Using GNApp-II, GNBC naming authorities can now submit naming decision documents to the database, as well as upload delineations of named features to the CGNDB.

Improving Indigenous geographical naming policies

Recognition and increased awareness of traditional geographical names contributes to the preservation, revitalization and strengthening of Indigenous histories, languages and cultures. The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* calls for Indigenous peoples to have the right to designate and retain their own names for communities and places. The naming authorities of the GNBC

have a long-standing interest in researching, documenting and approving geographical names that have Indigenous origins. The GNBC's Strategic Plan highlights and focuses the Board's commitments toward Indigenous geographical naming in Canada, and includes the following related key objectives:

- Advancing GNBC policy and research to encompass unique aspects of Indigenous naming;
- Strengthening exchanges between naming authorities and Indigenous experts to improve the performance of GNBC members in making more Indigenous names official;
- Extending the capacity of the national database to accurately record, store and disseminate unique aspects of Indigenous place names.

A 2016 survey of GNBC jurisdictions indicated that over 25 000 official geographical names in Canada have confirmed or presumed Indigenous roots, in over 50 languages or dialects. The GNBC has identified increased engagement with Indigenous communities and organizations as a strategic goal, with the intention of accurately recording, storing and disseminating Indigenous place names in the national database.

The GNBC's responsibility to accurately record, store and disseminate geographical names requires special consideration of Indigenous names and languages. These considerations include evolving orthographies; specialized character sets; accommodating the practice of naming agglomerations of features with a single toponym; officialising multiple names for a single feature; and using unique cultural generics. Accurately storing these names in the national database requires extended and evolving operability.

Establishing a national process for undersea feature naming

Due to the continuous exploration and exploitation of the unique ocean floor environment, Canada requires effective mechanisms for adopting authoritative names for undersea and maritime features. An important milestone in implementing the GNBC's Strategic Plan was reached in July 2015, with the reestablishment of the GNBC [Advisory Committee on Undersea Feature Names](#), chaired and coordinated by the Canadian Hydrographic Service of Fisheries and Oceans Canada. This interdepartmental committee of experts provides advice and recommendations to the GNBC on the naming of undersea features, and issues of terminology, translation and delineation. An effective and sustainable national process for experts to evaluate naming proposals for undersea features has been established to update the national geographical names data base with authoritative information.

The Advisory Committee is responsible for reviewing undersea and offshore surface maritime feature naming proposals for completeness and conformity with the [Principles for the Naming of Undersea and Surface Maritime Features](#) approved by the GNBC in 2014. The Committee investigates naming proposals in collaboration with members of the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) to ensure accuracy of supplied information. It then determines suitability of proposals, and recommends to the GNBC the acceptance or rejection of names of undersea and surface maritime features in Canadian waters.

Raising Awareness of Authoritative Geographical Names

The GNBC Strategic Plan recognizes the importance of engagement, communications and education in raising awareness of the cultural, historical and practical value of geographical names as an integral part

of Canadians' daily lives and shared cultural heritage. Raising awareness of official geographical names promotes visibility and credibility of geographical names; informs and educates people about official names; and influences attitudes, behaviors, beliefs and decisions regarding the use of official names. The Strategic Plan calls for a coordinated awareness strategy, profiling the importance of GNBC leadership in the development of standards, products and services, and communicating the benefits of authoritative geographical names, the naming process, and the necessity for rigorous naming standards.

In December 2016, the GNBC's Awareness Working Group released a thorough and comprehensive strategy document entitled *Raising Awareness – Canada's Place Names* that includes general guidelines and suggestions for GNBC members to consider when developing awareness raising activities in their jurisdiction. As part of the Awareness Strategy, the GNBC has taken steps to establish a Social Media presence. A group was established on LinkedIn to enable GNBC members to communicate various media articles related to geographical naming issues. Additionally, the NRCan Twitter account (@NRCan) has been used to communicate developments related to toponymy in Canada.

2017 is the 150th anniversary of Canada's confederation. A special "Canada 150" working group was established to develop a joint project between federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities to commemorate and celebrate the anniversary, as well as the 120th anniversary of the GNBC, in 2017. The project will develop commemorative maps, each focusing on a specific toponymic theme, including traditional Indigenous geographical names.

Conclusion

Careful management and application of Canada's geographical names remain as important now as in 1897, when a geographical naming authority was first established in Canada. The Geographical Names Board of Canada has reaffirmed and re-focussed its commitment to this task through the review and development of an updated Strategic Plan, outlining the direction of the Board until 2020. Progress on the Strategic Objectives will be monitored, and reviewed in depth. Any necessary adjustments will be made to adapt the work plans and resources, toward ultimately realizing the vision outlined in the Plan. The successful execution of this Strategic Plan will help to ensure that Canadians can continue to rely on accurate geographical names as a precious component of our culture and heritage, and an integral element of society, and that the GNBC can continue to meet the changing needs and expectations of its members, and those they serve.