

**Twenty-third Session
Vienna, 28 March – 4 April 2006**

**Item 16 of the Provisional Agenda :
Activities relating to the Working Group on the
Promotion of Indigenous and Minority Group Names**

**Promotion of Geographical Names Used by Minority Groups
and Aboriginal People in Quebec, Canada
(Translation of “Promotion des noms géographiques utilisés par les groupes
minoritaires et les autochtones du Québec, Canada”)**

Promotion of Geographical Names Used by Minority Groups and Aboriginal People in Quebec, Canada

[Translation of “Promotion des noms géographiques utilisés par les groupes minoritaires
et les autochtones du Québec, Canada”]

Background

“Nations and peoples are defined as much by their identifying characteristics as by the places in which they live. Groups of humans have established relationships between their identities and the land they occupy and have articulated those relationships in a geographical vocabulary of place names. Toponymy, therefore, is the eloquent reflection of the symbiotic relationship that exists between our planet and the societies that inhabit it.

In Quebec, each segment of Quebec society has contributed to the toponymic expression of this symbiosis. In this regard, the thousands of geographical names that the first inhabitants of this country have scattered across the land since time immemorial constitute a collective treasure shared by the entire population of Quebec — whence the need to take every possible measure to preserve this toponymic heritage and avoid losing a collective memory that will remain fragile until such time as it is properly inventoried, recorded and disseminated. This is one of the missions adopted by the Commission de toponymie du Québec.” (Henri Dorion, 1996)

Inventory and officialization of Aboriginal place names

In Quebec, Canada, the Quebec Geographical Board and, since 1977, the Commission de toponymie have had a program under way since the mid-1960s to inventory, officialize, preserve and disseminate Aboriginal geographical names. During that time, thousands of Aboriginal geographical names have been reviewed and made official.

In 1979, as part of its efforts to rediscover this toponymic treasure trove, the Commission de toponymie held a meeting on the graphic standardization of Aboriginal place names. Approximately 40 specialists participated in this meeting, which adopted 19 resolutions. The minutes of the meeting were then published in a work entitled *Atelier sur l'écriture des noms de lieux amérindiens* [Workshop on the Writing of Amerindian Place Names], and in 1984 the Commission published *Rapport d'étape concernant l'Atelier sur l'écriture des noms de lieux amérindiens, 1979-1984* [Workshop on the Writing of Amerindian Place Names, 1979-1984: Progress Report].

In 1969, the Quebec Geographical Board counted 1,560 Aboriginal toponyms that accounted for 4.7% of all of the official place names in Quebec.* Today, the official geographical nomenclature of Quebec includes 11,879 Aboriginal toponyms, representing 9.75% of the official corpus.*

In addition to official place names, the Commission de toponymie is also the repository for nearly 18,000 Aboriginal place names, which are essentially either graphical variants of official names or names designating places that are not sufficiently documented as to their nature or location. Aboriginal people make up approximately 1% of the total population of Quebec.

*** Not including the names of streets and other transportation routes.**

The Charter of the French Language and Quebec's policy on Aboriginal place names

The language policy of Quebec is founded on one major piece of legislation, *The Charter of the French Language*, which includes specific provisions for safeguarding the cultural heritage of Aboriginal peoples. The Preamble to the Charter includes the following statement:

“Whereas the National Assembly of Québec recognizes the right of the Amerindians and the Inuit of Québec, the first inhabitants of this land, to preserve and develop their original language and culture;”

Pursuant to this statement and in compliance with the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names, the Commission de toponymie adopted a policy on Aboriginal place names [the *Politique relative aux noms autochtones*], which establishes:

- 1) a number of fundamental principles, including the principle that the standardization of Aboriginal toponymy is based on a respect for the essence of languages and on the need to establish a body of reference for the Quebec community as a whole;
- 2) an application framework which targets various categories of toponyms, the establishment of toponymic inventories, toponymic research, and methods of community consultation, and which follows the Resolutions formulated at the Workshop on the writing of Aboriginal names (Québec, Canada, 1979) and the Native Geographical Names Symposium (Ottawa, Canada, 1986);
- 3) standards for the choice of names, specific elements, generic elements, variants and the choice of characters for the purposes of officialization. A copy of the policy is appended.

Publication of gazetteers of Aboriginal place names

In accordance with its mandate, the Commission de toponymie du Québec is responsible for the dissemination of Aboriginal place names, in particular by means of gazetteers devoted to the geographical nomenclature of the various Aboriginal nations present in Quebec. These gazetteers present the official names, the actual names used by Aboriginal persons, the nature and position of the places in question, and the meaning in French of the Aboriginal place names. To date, the Commission has published the following gazetteers: *La toponymie des Abénaquis* (1985); *La toponymie des Attikameks* (1987); *La toponymie des Naskapis* (1990); *La toponymie des Algonquins* (1999); *La toponymie des Hurons-Wendats* (2001); and *La toponymie des Cris* (2003).

Dissemination of Aboriginal place names on the Internet

Aboriginal place names are also disseminated on the Internet via the Commission's bank of place names, which may be consulted at any time free of charge. Electronic queries will yield all current and former official place names. The Commission also provides the meaning of names and, when such information is not currently available, the Commission encourages anyone who might know the meaning of a place name to contact their staff with that information. The Commission has also posted on its Web site a list of the names of Amerindian and Inuit communities and settlements in Quebec.

Commemorative place names

To promote the importance of the contribution made by Aboriginal place names to the toponymic heritage of Quebec and in order to pay homage to this geographical nomenclature, the Commission de toponymie has officially adopted half a dozen commemorative place names. These names were officially adopted in the 1980s and 1990s on National Aboriginal Day (June 21) or on March 8, International Women's Day, to celebrate the contributions of Aboriginal women.

Sources

Background

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The Charter of the French Language and Aboriginal people

Québec. Office québécois de la langue française. *Charte de la langue française*, [online], 2005. [<http://www.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca/english/charter/index.html>].
See the Preamble and articles 95 and 97.

Quebec policy on Aboriginal place names

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See also the appended text of the policy.

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Commission de toponymie du Québec, Canada
15 December 2005

Appendix

Commission de toponymie du Québec, Canada Policy on Aboriginal Place Names

- The Commission de toponymie recognizes the importance of Aboriginal place names as an integral part of our shared toponymic heritage.
- In areas inhabited or frequented by Aboriginal people, the Commission pays particular attention to Amerindian and Inuit place names in its selection of place names.
- The Commission respects the standardized writing systems specific to Aboriginal languages.
- Community consultation, particularly consultation of band councils, plays a vital role in the treatment of Aboriginal place names.

Basic principles

In its preamble, *The Charter of the French Language* recognizes “the right of the Amerindians and the Inuit of Québec [...] to preserve and develop their original language and culture.”

Aboriginal place names are important because of their cultural and technical contributions to Quebec geography. On the one hand, the richness of this toponymic heritage contributes to the manner in which space is partitioned and named; on the other hand, these geographical names are also invaluablely useful in regions of lower toponymic density.

The frailty of the oral tradition that constitutes the primary vehicle for the transmission of Aboriginal place names, as well as past, recent and anticipated upheaval in lands frequented by Aboriginal people lend a certain air of urgency to the work of inventorying these place names.

The standardization of Aboriginal toponymy is based on a respect for the essence of languages and on the need to establish a body of reference for the Quebec community as a whole.

Application framework

Categories of place names

The policy on Aboriginal place names applies to names that have already been inventoried for places in areas that are inhabited or frequented primarily by Aboriginal people. It will also apply to Aboriginal geographical names that will be inventoried in the future, regardless of the location of the entities involved.

It does not, however, apply to official place names of Aboriginal origin whose use is historical, except in respect of minor graphical changes that the Commission de toponymie may consider appropriate.

The Commission also feels that care should be exercised in applying an artificial system of Aboriginal toponymy to the creation of place names, particularly for unnamed places in controlled harvesting zones (ZECs) or outfitting concessions.

Toponymic research and inventories

While they are very numerous, Aboriginal place names have so far essentially been transmitted as part of an oral tradition and, until recently, were only occasionally preserved in writing. The Commission therefore intends to continue inventorying place names in the field and in documents where applicable. The Commission supports research by various specialists and increased involvement by Aboriginal representatives in efforts to improve our knowledge of Amerindian and Inuit place names.

Community consultation

The Commission consults appropriate Aboriginal authorities when toponymic investigations are conducted in areas frequented by Amerindian or Inuit people. It requires their opinions on the extent to which inventoried place names are actually used and in verifying the manner in which such places names are written.

The manner in which names are written presents delicate issues because of the large number of languages to be considered and the lack of consensus as to standardization. Since standardization efforts are currently under way, the Commission does not feel it would be appropriate for it to impose a set of rules, but it does nevertheless favour the stability of local spellings.

Privileged references

The resolutions adopted in March 1979 at the Workshop on the Writing of Amerindian Place Names in Québec and in May 1986 at the Native Geographical Names Symposium in Ottawa constitute privileged references supporting the Commission de toponymie's thinking and its actions with respect to Aboriginal place names.

Standards

Choice of names

The Commission is guided by local everyday usage in its choice of names for geographical entities located in areas frequented by Aboriginal people. Toponymic documentary or field research performed, commissioned, or supervised by the Commission reveals the extent to which inventoried toponyms are actually used as well as the reliability of sources.

Specifics

For the writing of specifics, the Commission draws its inspiration from local graphical usage, graphical usage throughout an entire nation, and the observed toponymic traditions of the language group in question.

Generics

Aboriginal place names that contain a generic (attached to or separate from the specific) in their language of origin are assigned a generic in French when they are officialized. This French generic represents the best possible translation of the Aboriginal term.

The separate Aboriginal generic is not included in the official name, unless it constitutes the sole element of the original place name. To counter the often negative reaction to Aboriginal place names that are considered too long and difficult to pronounce or remember, the Commission may officialize shortened versions of inventoried names, provided their meaning is not altered as a result. The Commission may, for instance, eliminate generics attached to the specific portion of place names. Any shortening of names must be done in collaboration with a representative of the nation concerned.

When an Aboriginal place name does not include a generic in its original form, the Commission, in officializing the name, will add a generic in French if and when this type of place name is usually expressed with a generic in French.

Variants

The Commission retains as variants of official names any and all forms of Aboriginal origin that it has standardized with a view to officialization, including the complete version of shortened names, as well as original forms that relate to a non-Aboriginal official name.

Choice of characters

For the officialized versions of Aboriginal place names, the characters of the Roman alphabet are used.

Variants may include diacritical marks specific to an Aboriginal language or be written in a local alphabet.