Twenty-eight session
28 April – 2 May 2014

Item 8 of the Provisional Agenda

Activities relating to the Working Group on Training Courses in Toponymy

Report of the Liaison officer with the
Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH) ∗

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Overview (course presentation), 2012-2014

The José Joaquín Hungría Morell Geographic Names Course offered under the auspices of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH) was held in Panamá City, Panamá from 15 -19 July 2013. The Instituto Geográfico Nacional Tommy Guardia served as host and provided excellent training facilities and administrative support at the Institute

The importance of applied toponymy is evident worldwide, and has been noted to be essential in local, regional, and national planning as well as emergency response and preparedness, national security, environmental analysis, and a variety of similar applications. In short, standardization of geographic names is a major factor in support of a nation's spatial data infrastructure. The two-week course is designed to provide an introduction and basis for national standardization of geographic names and a program of applied toponymy. The first week is predominately lecture and addresses various aspects of applied toponymy, and concentrates heavily upon all requirements involved in establishing a program of national standardization, while exploring conventional and alternate methods of achieving this goal. Normally, there is a comprehensive field exercise offering students the opportunity of actual data gathering, processing, and analyzing in accordance with established toponymic field procedures. The second week of the course is devoted to a workshop in automated data processing where the student designs databases and files, as well as acquires the ability to retrieve and analyze toponymic data in a microprocessing environment. Finally, there is an exercise where a names staff interacts with a mock national names authority in applying principles and policies of standardization.

The twenty-third course was comprised of 32 students all from the Instituto Geográfico Nacional Tommy Guardia. The course this year was altered considerably for a variety of reasons. Instead of the traditional two-week period the course was shortened to one week as a result of the advanced status of the situation of applied toponymy in Panamá and at the Instituto Geográfico Nacional Tommy Guardia. The module on methods of establishing a program of national standardization was altered considerably because such a program is well-established in Panamá and functioning accordingly. The focus of this module was to have the students examine the existing committee's structure, secretariat, and policies; and then to make presentations regarding the nature of the administrative organization and a complete analysis of the existing policies based upon lecture and exchange of ideas and analyses. The field exercise was eliminated in this course presentation because the Instituto Geográfico Nacional Tommy Guardia (responsible for the national mapping program in Panamá and where the Secretariat of the national names program is housed) has an active, well-developed, and well-established program of field collection and verification although there was a meaningful exchange between the students and instructors regarding methodology and experience. The primary focus of this course was on design and development of a national automated system for the national geographic names program since the Instituto Geográfico Nacional Tommy Guardia (on behalf the national names authority) is developing an automated names database for this purpose and is in the initial stage of that development. This was the primary purpose of the course in Panamá this year. As is usually the case, more time would have been useful; however, there was a most meaningful exchange of methodological requirements as well as procedures for development including known problems with possible and potential solutions (the automated system to be used has been chosen and so was addressed directly). The Institute is well-poised for proceeding with development and implementation of this program of automation and all agree that the course served a vital role in serving as a discussion forum for requirements and procedure.

As ever, while the course has evolved into a well-structured set of seven inter-related modules, and with this specific considerable adjustment and re-formatting, the course continues to be an excellent forum for sharing common problems and defining solutions. The flexibility in the curriculum of the course continues to be a major asset to advancing programs of national name standardization and the overall implementation of applied toponymy in support of national mapping programs and in support of national spatial data infrastructure. Importantly, differences and commonalities between and among various agencies are normally discussed and solutions for optimization of effort and resources are offered. In this case, the focus was more specific and on a higher level of activity since the general programs and procedures have been established in Panamá and is functioning accordingly.

As part of the summary, the changing role of the name layer (one of the eight identified essential layers of a national digital map program) in a national spatial data environment, and the increasing requirements for digital mapping, both general and thematic were examined and discussed with a meaningful exchange. As part of the extensive program of data collection in preparation for populating the newly developed national name database, techniques of collecting data, extant and otherwise, were examined thoroughly where various techniques, some already in use in Panamá and some not yet in use were examined with special emphasis on source type, value, and reliability (provenance) .

So, this specifically focused course achieved its goals regarding potentially enhancing Panamá's national names program by providing training and information highly useful to establishing and growing the foundation of the newly developing national names database. By the way, the team of three instructors from the USA, Mexico (originally), and Honduras are well versed in team teaching, and the course is recognized by the United Nations Geographical Name Training Committee.

As usual, conclusions indicate that there is a high level of interest in this course and it is well received. So, the teaching team, while experiencing some recent setbacks is still actively pursuing putting the course online.

The future

Online web course

The Cartographic Commission's Working Group on Geographical Names at the Pan American Institute of Geography & History (PAIGH) has continued working on its major project, which is the development of an online version of the geographic names course in applied toponymy. The timetable for implementation of the online course has been redefined with a projected completion date of late 2014. So, the PAIGH Working Group on Geographical Names expects to have various forms of the training course made available. Specifically, an online version in future, and shortened onsite versions concentrating on specific country needs and requirements. The full version of the course can still be made available onsite if necessary and requested. The conventional version of the course will become periodic, have a changed focus, and with special application once the full online version is available. The conventional version is available as the introductory two-week version or (as in 2013) an advanced version of one-week duration.

Integrated geographic names data system for the Latin American Community

 As we continue to report, the Working Group is most interested in pursuing and even directing or assisting in the establishment and development of an integrated geographic names data system for the Latin American Community to serve as the single authoritative source for users requiring standardized names for use in any project or task and also for toponymic support of national and regional spatial data infrastructures.