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**Activities relating to the Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage**

## **Indigenous Naming Activities in Canada**

Submitted by Canada\*

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# **Indigenous Naming Activities in Canada**

## **SUMMARY**

Recognition and use of traditional Aboriginal names helps preserve and strengthen Indigenous languages and cultures. This paper highlights Indigenous naming activities in Canada, the Geographical Names Board of Canada's strategic priority of supporting Indigenous naming, as well as a project to build Indigenous capacity for northern geographical place naming.

### **Background**

Place names are extremely important to Indigenous Peoples as a reflection of their culture and heritage, and also as a tool for language preservation. The Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) is Canada's national coordinating body responsible for standards and policies on place names. The GNBC comprises federal, provincial and territorial departments and agencies, each with specific authority and responsibility for their respective jurisdictions.

Federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities regularly consult with Aboriginal communities, cultural associations and heritage groups to collect traditional Aboriginal names, as well as information on their meaning and origin. Many traditional Aboriginal names collected in field work or through historical research are approved by the naming authorities and become official for use.

Recognition of traditional names has been a long-standing area of interest and study for the GNBC. Work on policy, research and outreach in this area has been advanced through the activities of GNBC members. In 1986, the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (CPCGN), a predecessor of the GNBC, hosted a national Native Geographical Names Symposium that resulted in significant resolutions on naming policy. In 1992, the CPCGN published the "Guide to the field collection of native geographical names".

### **2015-2020 GNBC Strategic Plan**

In 2014, the GNBC adopted an ambitious, forward looking Strategic Plan to guide the Board's activities for the period 2015-2020. The Strategic Plan highlights and focuses the Board's commitments toward geographical naming in Canada, and includes the following key objectives related to Aboriginal place names:

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

The focus on Aboriginal place names aligns with a commitment by the Government of Canada to establish a renewed relationship with Canada's Indigenous Peoples. Implementation of the priorities outlined in the Strategic Plan is underway through several active Working Groups

composed of federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities. Through these focused Working Groups, GNBC members will: seek and develop new partnerships; build capacity through education and training; establish and improve communication with Aboriginal groups and communities; and seek advice of Aboriginal experts in developing policy and procedures.

A GNBC Working Group is currently developing a project to commemorate the sesquicentennial anniversary of Canada in 2017. The joint project between the federal, territorial and provincial naming authorities will celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Canada, as well as the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the GNBC, through the development of a web-based and paper thematic map on Aboriginal place names in Canada.

A further focus of the GNBC Strategic Plan is engagement with international organizations. The 2015 US Council of Geographic Names Authorities Conference in Anchorage, Alaska, was an opportunity for Canada and the USA to exchange information on Indigenous naming. Canada was represented by three members of the Yukon Geographical Place Names Board, and by the Yukon Territorial Toponymist.

### **Aboriginal Languages in Canada's National Names Database**

The Canadian Geographical Names Database (CGNDB) allows naming authorities of the GNBC to indicate the language of the toponym. The language may be defined from a standardized ISO list and contains 74 languages used by Canada's Indigenous Peoples, as well as English and French.

A significant example of recent Aboriginal naming is the adoption by the Northwest Territories of five additional traditional names for the Mackenzie River (Canada's longest and largest river system), in addition to the existing English and French names (Table 1).

**TABLE 1: MULTIPLE OFFICIAL NAMES FOR THE MACKENZIE RIVER**

<b>Geographical Name</b>	<b>Language</b>
Deho	North Slave (Hare)
Dehcho	South Slave
Nagwichoonyjik	Kutchin-Gwich'in (Loucheux)
Kuukpak	Inuktitut, Western Canadian (Inuvialuktun)
Grande Rivière	Michif
Mackenzie River	English
Fleuve Mackenzie	French

In the territory of Nunavut, a committee of Indigenous elders meets regularly to review and make recommendations on naming proposals for traditional Indigenous names gathered over many decades of field work. Thousands of such names have become official since Nunavut came into being in 1999.

In the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, 448 traditional names supplied by the Innu Nation were approved by the Newfoundland and Labrador Geographical Names Board in 2015.

In the province of Ontario, in consultation with the Pikangikum First Nation, the Ontario Geographic Names Board approved 17 Ojibway geographical names as dual names along with the previously approved non-Aboriginal names.

Expert advice has helped the GNBC Secretariat to resolve technical and linguistic issues in storing Aboriginal names in the CGNDB, and correctly displaying special characters and diacritics used in writing Aboriginal languages in publications and on websites.

**TABLE 2: WRITTEN REPRESENTATION OF NAMES IN ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES**

<b>Territory</b>	<b>Place Name</b>	<b>Syllabic Form</b>	<b>Language</b>
Nunavut	Nanuqsiutitalik	ᑭᓄᓂᑦᓂᓂᓂᓂᑦᓂᓂᑦ	Inuktitut-Eastern Canadian
Northwest Territories	Behchokò		Dogrib
Yukon	Nu Détsyáwa M̄ñ		Northern Tutchone

### **Building Indigenous Capacity for Geographical Place Naming in Canada’s North**

In December 2015, Natural Resources Canada (NRCan) launched an initiative to develop Aboriginal inclusion in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. The project will focus on building Indigenous capacity for geographical place naming in Canada’s north. The goals of the project are:

- To enhance representation with respect to Indigenous Peoples in key STEM fields with a particular emphasis on Canada’s northern territories of Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut;
- Transfer knowledge and support career development through mentoring;
- Support Canada’s Spatial Data Infrastructure in the north.

The project will engage Indigenous students in Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut for technical geomatics/geospatial skills training, especially to delineate place names in Canada’s North. A further focus is the definition of spatial guidelines for *topocomplexes*, implementing unique Indigenous understandings of geographical features that are made up of more than one distinct feature, but identified by a single toponym (Figure 1). The project will provide an opportunity for collaboration between NRCan, territorial governments, and Aboriginal entities in Canada’s North.

**FIGURE 1: EXAMPLE OF A TOPOCOMPLEX COMPRISED OF A BAY AND CAPE**



### **Looking Forward**

The applied toponymic practices of Aboriginal communities are distinctive within Canada. This has been recognized by the GNBC for some time, and work in this area of policy, research and outreach has been advanced through the activities of the Board members. Opportunity is recognized in the leadership and experience of northern jurisdictions to promote best practices. The GNBC looks to strengthen relationships with Indigenous communities, seeking opportunities to improve exchanges and highlight traditional names in our national lexicon.