

# WHY DO WE NEED GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES STANDARDIZATION?

## Geographical names – a basic reference

Geographical names constitute the most widely used reference framework for indicating location. The existence of more than one name for a given place raises uncertainty and can lead to confusion. In order to improve communication between peoples, countries and cultures, standardization of geographical names reflecting local usage is required.



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## Geographical names in everyday speech

Many place names have found their way into everyday speech to describe, for example, geographical terms, food, drinks, textiles and clothing. River windings known as meanders take their name from the river Meandros in Turkey, a karst or eroded limestone landscape is derived from the region of Karst near Trieste and the period of geological time known as the Jurassic Age is named after the Jura Mountains. Foods and drinks such as turkey, parmesan, the hamburger, champagne, cognac and sherry are all derived from the names of places. An orange in Arabic is *burdukān* or *burdukāl* which means Portugal, the same fruit in German being Apfelsine which means apple of China. La dinde, the French for turkey, is named after India. Textiles such as denim, tweed and cashmere take their names from places around the world (the city of Nîmes in France, the River Tweed in Scotland and the region of Kashmir in Asia) and the world of fashion gives us clothing such as the cardigan, the bikini and the cravat (Cardigan in Wales, Bikini Atoll in the Pacific and cravat derived from the name Croatia). In addition to all of this, we only have to go onto the internet to see how many place names have been used as domain names.

In most of these cases, place names have changed from proper nouns into common nouns. Just as in every day speech, grammar and consistent spelling are important, the same applies to the use of geographical names in their own right.

## What is geographical names standardization?

The word *standardization* as applied to geographical names is defined by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names as:

- (a) The establishment, by an appropriate authority, of a specific set of standards or norms, for example, for the uniform rendering of geographical names;
- (b) Rendering an item such as a geographical name in accordance with such norms.



Photo: Helen Kerfoot

A standardized name is defined as “A name sanctioned by a names authority as the preferred name from among a number of variant names for a given feature. However, a single feature may have more than one standardized name”, for example, the capital of bilingual Finland is Helsinki (Finnish) or Helsingfors (Swedish) and in New Zealand Mount Egmont, named by Captain Cook, is also known by its Maori name Taranaki.

At the national level names standardization involves the selection of the most appropriate names in their written form based on principles, policies and procedures established by the names authority in that country. Worldwide geographical names standards are equally important for clear communication involving data exchange.

### Who benefits from geographical names standardization?

Modern society depends on the use of standard geographical names for accurate and efficient administration and communication. A national standardization programme produces savings in time and money by increasing operational efficiency in all levels of government, industry, commerce and education. In particular, national standardization processes should eliminate duplication of work where more than one office or agency needs to use a body of consistent geographical names. A national names authority also gives a country the means to establish its own officially accepted names, instead of their having to be determined by non-governmental or international map, atlas and gazetteer makers.

The following are just some examples of organizations whose efficient operation depends on consistency in the naming of locations:

- Map makers and national surveying institutions
- Regional and local authorities charged with administering to the needs of people identified by their address
- Legal institutions such as offices which register land holdings that are usually tied to a named locality
- Institutions which administer and conserve named natural and cultural heritage sites including antiquities, nature reserves and national parks
- Statistical bureaus which base their population censuses and social surveys on named, populated places
- Tourism authorities which cater to both domestic and international markets promoting named attractions, hotels, restaurants and other facilities
- Public works departments engaged in signposting along roads and other lines of communication
- The manufacturers and users of automatic surface, air and sea navigation systems
- Authorities of law and order such as the police and the armed forces who need to respond quickly to events at named locations
- The emergency services such as firefighting and ambulance networks as well as air and sea rescue
- Natural disaster control and humanitarian relief agencies
- The public media when dealing with events worldwide
- The corporate world in developing brand names
- Internet users in creating domain names and searching for geographically referenced information



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