



## Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General  
13 June 2012  
English  
Original: English, French

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### Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names

New York, 31 July – 9 August 2012

Item 9 of the provisional agenda\*

**Geographical names as culture, heritage and identity  
(including indigenous, minority and regional language names).**

### The Pikangikum Project: A Dialogue-Based Approach to Indigenous Naming in Ontario (Canada)

Submitted by Canada\*\*

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\* E/CONF.101/1.

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## **The Pikangikum Project: A Dialogue-Based Approach to Indigenous Naming in Ontario (Canada)**

### **1. Introduction**

In July 2010, the Ontario Geographic Names Board (OGNB), the authority responsible for the naming of geographical features in the province, became involved in a mapping initiative in the Far North area of the province where many dispersed Cree and Ojibway communities live. Pikangikum, a remote First Nation locality in northwestern Ontario near the Manitoba border, was selected for a pilot toponymic survey with the aim of recording and preserving the Ojibway names in the area. This community has the highest rate of indigenous language retention among the First Nations of northern Ontario. Since 1996, Pikangikum First Nation has engaged with the Ministry of Natural Resources to complete a land use strategy for the Whitefeather Forest, 1,3 million hectares of Pikangikum traditional territory. The Whitefeather Forest land use strategy reflects the community elder's goal of creating forestry-based community economic opportunities for Pikangikum youth, while maintaining customary uses and stewardship responsibilities within their territory (see [www.whitefeatherforest.com](http://www.whitefeatherforest.com)).

As a result of the survey, seventeen names in common and local usage were presented for approval to the OGNB. As all of the features involved were lakes that had been previously officially approved in English, the Board was interested in seeing if, in addition to the Dual-Name approval process, the Alternate Name policy originally developed for French minority names could be adapted to the Ojibway names of northwestern Ontario.

### **2. Dialogue with the First Nations**

The Board first contacted a group of Far North First Nations through its Far North Representative to inform the community of its Principles and Procedures of Geographical Naming. Some of these principles were met with strong reservations, if not outright opposition by the First Nation communities. Two issues in particular were singled out: (a) the statement on the origin and formation of geographical names in Ontario and (b) the Board's rejection of names that were deemed cumbersome.

With regard to the first issue, the First Nations pointed out, quite correctly, that the OGNB Principles and Procedures made no mention of the contribution of First Nations to the geographical naming process in the province. In the second case, the First Nations were concerned that their names would be rejected on the sole basis that they were unusually long or difficult to pronounce.

After careful consideration of the issues at hand, the Board decided to modify its Principles and Procedures in response to the concerns of the First Nations. It modified the clause concerning cumbersome names, reserving judgement instead on a case by case basis. As well, it made specific mention of the First Nations' involvement in the establishment of the geographical nomenclature of Ontario. Article 1.1. now includes a more balanced statement concerning the formation of the various name strata in the province:

“Official names in Ontario show the equal and special significance of a number of groups who are responsible for its development, including the First Nations, the first people of this land, whose names demonstrate their intimate connection with the land for thousands of years and the French and English speech communities whose history in our province dates back to the early 1600’s.”(Ontario Geographic Names Board 2010)

### **3. The Pikangikum Questionnaire**

Once the principles and procedures were modified, Pikangikum First Nation was chosen as a likely pilot project site to take the dialogue one step further as they were actively engaged in planning for which names were considered an important support feature. The Board prepared a questionnaire concerning the names being considered for adoption. The aim was to see to what extent these names could be integrated into the general design of the OGNB names database while addressing issues of orthography and representation on official maps.

The following are the questions that were addressed specifically to the Pikangikum First Nation (PFN), the answers that were received and action taken by the Board.

**3.1 Question: *Would Chief and Council object to the use of existing official names along with the PFN names?***

Answer: NO

It was important to find out at the very outset if the Dual-Name or Alternate Name principles could be applied in a First Nation context. The First Nation responded it had no objection to the use of the existing (English tradition) official names along with their customary indigenous names. This opened the way to the application of the Alternate Name principle, as well as the Dual-Name principle in the case of commemorative names. We shall return to this issue in further detail in point 4.

**3.2 Question: *Are the 17 Ojibway Names written in standard roman orthography?***

Answer: NO.

Because of their incidence in cartography and in legislation, standardized orthographies are of paramount importance in any naming protocol. As only a few of Canada's First Nation languages have standardized writing systems, the Board wished to ensure some measure of stability and consistency in the orthography of the proposed names. At the present time, there is no standardized orthography for the Ojibway language, which uses both roman and syllabic writing systems. The use of syllabics is widespread but not systematic while the roman alphabet has the advantage of being accessible to both First Nation and non-First Nation populations. In its proposal, the Pikangikum First Nation submitted its 17 names for approval in roman orthography and did not require that they also be approved in syllabic form at this time. This was an encouraging point as the OGNB database is not currently able to handle syllabic characters. In accordance with its own principles, the Board therefore required that the Band Council approve the spelling in roman orthography of each proposed name before submitting them for approval. The Band Council complied.

**3.3. Question: *Can the names be broken down in any way to assist non-First Nation users with recognition and pronunciation?***

Answer: YES

This delicate question deals with an often raised issue relating to the structure of First Nation toponyms. The geoname matrix imported from Europe and then spread over the North American continent involves an onomastic compound normally divided into two elements: a generic (the word that identifies the type of geographic feature such as a *river*, an *island*, a *lake* etc.) and a specific (the name which is unique to that feature as in *Mississippi River*, *Manitoulin Island*, *Lake Michigan* etc.). First Nation toponyms do not always follow this generic/specific model and are rather based on discourse or narratives. As a result, some names can be very long such as *Pekwachnamaykoskwawaypinwanik* ("where one catches wild trout with hooks") or *Kuchistiniwamiskahikan* ("island where canoes enter in the bay"). In the officialization process, naming authorities have often treated these narratives as specifics and then added English or French generics in an effort to align the names with the generic/specific model, creating unusually long toponyms such as *Pekwachnamaykoskwawaypinwanik Lake* in Manitoba or *Île Kuchistiniwamiskahikan* in Québec. These forms are not only difficult to read but present serious challenges when they must be entered into name databases or used on maps. The Board wanted to see if the proposed PFN names *per se* could be broken into generic and specific elements. Interestingly, some of the names followed the generic/specific model. For example, *chepahyeesahkaheekhan* can be written in two words: *chepahyee* ("one pine") being the specific element of the name and *sahkaheekhan* ("lake"), being the generic element. In the Board's view, this offered a novel opportunity to blend First Nation and European name traditions while, at the same time, reducing the length of the First Nation name and making it easier to pronounce by non-First Nation speakers.

**3.4. Question: *Most components of Canadian toponyms begin with upper case letters. Could the previous example be written: Chepahyee Sahkaheekhan?***

Answer: YES

Such standardization would not cause any concerns among the Pikangikum people and was accepted by the Board as another way to make First Nation names more easily recognizable by non-First Nation speakers and more consistent with Canadian writing standards.

**3.5 Question: Would PFN object if an English generic were added to the Ojibway name, i.e. Chepahyee Sahkaheekahn Lake to assist non-First Nation users?**

Answer: YES

In the minds of the PFN community, the addition of a non-First Nation generic would denature and compromise the Ojibway essence of the name. As well, it would confuse bilingual children learning both Ojibway and English who would perceive the *Lake* element as repetitive and redundant. The Board accepted the position of Pikangikum and decided against the addition of non-First Nation generics. In doing so, the Board was influenced by recent decisions taken by other toponymic authorities in the world, including New Zealand with regard to its Maori names and British Columbia with regard to its Nisga'a names. These authorities are now approving First Nation toponyms based on their actual usage in the Aboriginal speech community, without adding any foreign elements. While this solution might present challenges to non-First Nation speakers, it is more respectful of the cultural identity of First Nations. It will perhaps take some time before it is generally accepted, but in the end, it will be another step forward and in keeping with the current trend, developed since the 1960s, to recognize Aboriginal toponymy in its essence and embrace the cultural diversity it represents.

In view of the responses to the questionnaire, the Board decided to consider the PFN names for adoption with separated elements (generic and specific) whenever possible, using upper case letters for each element and without adding any English generics. As for orthography, the names would be considered for adoption in the roman orthography, with spellings provided by the Pikangikum First Nation and endorsed by a Band Council Resolution before being submitted to the Minister of Natural Resources for approval. The use of syllabics is not considered at this time.

#### **4. Applying the Alternate or Dual Name Principle**

Having secured the necessary information concerning the written form of the proposed names, the Board then proceeded to discuss their status. As all the features in question had already been officially named previously, it had to be decided if the PFN names would have Alternate or Dual-Name status. Let us briefly review the definition of both classes:

**Alternate Name:** A geographical name, in a different language than the official name, that is in local usage in a minority speech community. In keeping with the United Nations resolutions concerning the status of names in multi-lingual areas, these names are given *alternate official status with the official name*, the alternation being determined by specific contexts, namely mapping, prose-text applications and road signage.

Ex. *Lac des Bois* is the alternate name for *Lake of the Woods* and appears in bracketed form and smaller font under the official name on the Official Highway Map of Ontario.

**Dual Name:** A geographical name, in a different language than the official name, that is in usage in a minority speech community. In keeping with the United Nations resolutions concerning the status of names in multi-lingual areas, these names are given *equal official status with the official name* and are to be used at all times and in all contexts along with the official name, each name being separated by a slash bar.

Ex: *Stoney Point / Pointe-aux-Roches*, a municipality in Southwestern Ontario.

As one can see, both the alternate and the dual name differ from the official name but only in the case of dual names are both forms to be used at all times and in all contexts. The alternate name has an on/off switch, so to speak, that is activated depending on the context. If, for example, the scale of a map does not allow it to be used in bracketed form along with the official name, then it cannot be used. Both dual and alternate names have official status and require ministerial approval.

During the summer of 2011, an extensive consultation with First Nation and non-First Nation communities was undertaken as well as with other government departments, municipalities, tourist and business concerns in the area. As some of the lake names were commemorative in nature and associated with war casualties from WWI

and WWII, veteran associations were contacted and informed of the project. No concerns were expressed and, in fact, the Army, Navy & Air Force Veterans in Canada Association (ANAVETS) indicated their support for this initiative.

As a result of this final round of consultations, the Board decided that the most appropriate solution would be to confer Dual-Name Status to all 17 PFN names, giving equal status to both the First Nation and the current official name. On April 19, 2012, these names were approved by the Ontario Minister of Natural Resources and will now be entered into the Official Record of the Province.

## **5. Conclusion**

The Board believes that having engaged in an exchange of points of view with the First Nation community has lead to an enhanced appreciation of First Nation names and a better understanding of the contribution of First Nations to the geographical naming process in Ontario. The adoption of the Pikangikum names opens the door to further recognition of First Nation and Metis names in northern Ontario and elsewhere in the province. This initiative, as pointed out earlier, is in keeping with similar efforts being taken elsewhere in Canada (provinces of Québec and British Columbia; Territories of Yukon, Northwest territories and Nunavut) and throughout the world aiming at recognizing and disseminating Aboriginal names on maps, in prose text applications and road signage as well as in new geomatic applications and geo-referencing technologies.

The Ontario initiative provides a high level of integrity of First Nation names. It respects local usage and does not add foreign generics to the First Nation name. At the same time, it ensures a high level of integrity of previously approved non-First Nation names through the dual naming protocol. It also provides a high level of readability thanks to the use of roman orthography and word separation. More importantly, this approach embraces dynamic diversity and constitutes a significant contribution to the survival of First Nation languages in North America.

## **R e f e r e n c e s**

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Whitefeather Forest Initiative [www.whitefeatherforest.com](http://www.whitefeatherforest.com)