

Group of Experts on
Geographical Names

Fourteenth Session
Geneva, 17-26 May 1989

WORKING PAPER

No. 39
17 May 1989

Agenda item 6(a)

17

THE MANDATE AND ROLES OF A NATIONAL NAMES AUTHORITY

Submitted by Helen Kerfoot, CPOGN Secretariat, Canada

CANADIAN PERMANENT COMMITTEE ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES

- THE MANDATE AND ROLES OF A NATIONAL NAMES AUTHORITY -

Prepared from a paper by Jean-Paul Drolet, CPCGN Chairman 1964-1988
Submitted by Helen Kerfoot, CPCGN Secretariat, Canada

During recent years the standardization of geographical names has become of increasing importance to many countries and international organizations. Nearly all the countries of the world have a central organization, or at least a working group, responsible for geographical nomenclature. This situation has arisen as a result of one of the principal resolutions of the First Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names held under the auspices of the United Nations in Geneva in 1967.

In the case of Canada, such an organization has existed for over 90 years, and Quebec has had a central authority in place for over 75 years. Five other provinces and territories now have geographical names boards (Newfoundland, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta and Yukon) while the other six have groups of specialists to make decisions and to provide information on toponyms within their jurisdictions.

1. MANDATE OF THE CPCGN

The CPCGN was established in 1897, as the Geographic Board of Canada, with a view to:

- standardizing Canada's geographical names
- providing advice to organizations and federal departments on the origin, spelling and use of geographical names

(It should be noted that at that time and even until about 35 years ago, except in the case of Quebec, few provinces had an organization devoted to toponymy).

Under the mandate conferred by its current Order in Council PC 1969-1458, the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (the successor to the Geographic Board) is "the authority on all matters of geographical nomenclature affecting Canada". It initiates or contributes to the development of policies, principles and methodology for the linguistic and cartographic treatment of names and generic terminology.

The work of the Committee involves two complementary aspects of geographical nomenclature:

- a technical role] to record and approve geographical names for official
- a social and cultural role] use

2. COMPOSITION

The Committee of 23 members comprises:

- a) Representatives from the ten provinces and two territories of Canada.
- b) Representatives of federal departments involved with surveying and mapping: Canada Centre for Mapping EMR, Geological Survey of Canada, Canadian

Hydrographic Service, National Defence). In addition there are representatives from areas of translation, archives, Indian reserves, parks and statistics.

- c) Chairpersons of three advisory committees reporting to the CPCGN:
- Advisory Committee on Undersea and Maritime Feature Names (the Secretariat services are supplied by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans)
 - Advisory Committee on Toponymy Research
 - Advisory Committee on Glaciological and Alpine Nomenclature

3. TECHNICAL ROLE

The first function of the Committee members is to record and approve geographical names for official use, by:

- a) accurately determining the toponym and its application (coordinates, extent)
- b) determining the correct written form
- c) determining the suitable official form (normally in most jurisdictions following the principle of "univocity" - "one name for one place")

This technical role is realized in accordance with principles developed by the Committee and consolidated in the publication "Principles and procedures for geographical naming".

The principles address:

- a) collection of names
- b) selection criteria
- c) rules for writing
- d) officialization by the appropriate authorities, taking into account geographical and social factors (e.g. local usage, need for "alternate" names, recognition of native names, translation)

This concern for standardization allows accurate and consistent information to be provided to:

- a) federal departments and agencies
- b) provincial, territorial and municipal governments
- c) foreign governments and organizations involved in the United Nations
- d) the general public

4. ACTIVITIES OF THE SECRETARIAT

The Committee members meet in plenary session once a year, and the three advisory committees meet once or twice a year.

In addition, in recent years, the Secretariat has organized symposia, workshops and ad hoc committees on:

- international trans-boundary names (Canada-USA)
- automation of geographical names
- treatment of native names (amerindian and inuit)
- treatment of "alternate" names
- gazetteers
- names outside Canada for official Canadian usage

The Secretariat:

- a) Collaborates with and advises CPCGN members, particularly in jurisdictions not having a names board.
- b) Participates in congresses and symposia in Canada and abroad (e.g. Canadian Society for the Study of Names, American Name Society).
- c) Maintains numerous reference materials (even though the Secretariat does not have a library in the formal sense) and maintains an inventory of toponymic research being undertaken in Canada.
- d) Provides information and verification services on toponyms, in response to numerous enquiries from CPCGN members (provincial and federal), universities, researchers, linguists, etymologists, foreign governments and agencies who publish maps and atlases of Canada. Over 1000 enquiries on 2000-2500 names, and some 20,000 verifications are completed annually.
- e) Participates in the ongoing work of the Group of Experts of the United Nations as well as of the UN conferences on the standardization of geographical names held every five years.
- f) Participates in work on the Gazetteer of Canada series, produced for the Committee by the Canada Centre for Mapping.
- g) Maintains records of all Canadian toponyms for entry into the automated National Toponymic Data Base, and for map production.

Publications:

- On the occasion of the five UN Conferences (1967, 1972, 1977, 1982 and 1987), the Secretariat has published reports entitled "Geographical Names and the United Nations", containing the conference resolutions and documents presented by Canada.
- A new edition of CPCGN principles and procedures "Principles and procedures for geographical naming" (1987).
- A glossary of "Generics in use in Canada's geographical names" (1987): a bilingual publication prepared jointly by a committee of the Translation Bureau, Secretary of State, and the CPCGN Advisory Committee on Glaciological and Alpine Nomenclature.
- Since 1975, the CPCGN has published annually two issues of CANOMA containing news and comments on the toponymy of Canada.
- Various information pamphlets on geographical names, available gazetteers, etc.

5. CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ROLE

The CPCGN's technical role (where the preciseness of toponymy is addressed) is complemented by its role in a cultural and social context, in recognizing:

- the importance of the cultural and historical significance of a geographical name
- the accurate recording of toponyms in oral tradition

based on:

- established selection criteria (for example, local usage)

- the need to prevent confusion or controversy
- the adoption of unambiguous terminology for toponyms expressed in one or more languages (French, English, Amerindian or Inuktitut). The CPCGN has the important mission to preserve Canada's toponymic richness by identifying, documenting and providing authoritative information on the country's geographical names.

Toponymy is an integral part of our national heritage and an aspect of our culture that must be preserved.

6. THE FUTURE - THE CPCGN AND THE CPCGN SECRETARIAT

During the next five years the CPCGN Secretariat has continuing responsibilities, including:

- serving the CPCGN and coordinating activities of its members
- assuring that geographical names information meeting national standards is available to users, including map producers
- providing accurate toponymic information to enquiries from CPCGN members, the public and private sector
- working with names authorities of other countries, through organizations such as the UN, towards international standards and practices
- disseminating information on the CPCGN and promoting official names usage
- addressing questions of policies and procedures, for example of English/French linguistic treatment in maps and texts

In addition, the CPCGN Secretariat should address current concerns of its members, including:

- increasing awareness of native toponymy, which implies:
 - orchestration of development of CPCGN guidelines and policies, and facilitating liaison with native groups and other countries having similar concerns
- increasing needs for the recognition of "alternate" forms of official names (i.e. authorized alternate language forms of official names; for example French, Amerindian or Ukrainian names used for features having an official English toponym; or an Inuktitut name of a place carrying an official French name)
- increasing automation of geographical name records, and of the transmittal of data from the provinces and territories, and building and improving data fields
- increasing efforts to publicize the role of the CPCGN and to disseminate toponymic information
- increasing needs for completion of a basic level of field recording of geographical names across Canada

It is obviously not easy to show in figures - in dollars, or otherwise - what would happen in the absence of an organization such as the CPCGN.

In the case of the federal government, we can certainly say that the absence of a central body dedicated to toponymy would give rise to duplication and parallel activities in the departments and areas that need precise toponymic information. Very easily, ambiguity and inconsistency of toponymic data used on official documents could proliferate.

Costs involved would certainly surpass the budget of the Secretariat - salaries of 5 PY and operating costs of some \$60K per annum.

In the final analysis, the principal benefit of standardizing geographical names is that every Canadian in daily life may correctly identify reference points, be it in laws, regulations, legal notices or official documents; in educational materials; or from the viewpoint of a tourist.

Beyond the administrative aspects of toponymy, such as standardization of geographical names, the Committee attempts to extend its interests to other fields related to Canadian toponymy - history, politics, geography, linguistics and even folklore. The creation of place names is also a sociological phenomenon; the study of toponyms informs us about man's relationship with his environment. This is why toponymy is of interest to historians, geographers, folklorists, linguists, sociologists, and government administrators, as well as to scholars and the public at large.

It is to be hoped that many more researchers will become acquainted with toponymic matters that touch upon the work of the human sciences in general, that is, the fields of etymology, lexicography, philology, ethnology and anthropology. In these fields, the scientists could capably investigate such matters and present us with a broader picture of Canadian culture.

Reference: "Avantages économiques et sociaux de la normalisation nationale et internationale" E/CONF.79/L.54. Document presented by Canada (Alain Vallières, Québec) at the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, Montréal, August 1987.