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NATIVE TOPONYMS - PILOT PROJECT 1990

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Geographical names of the native people of Canada form an important and integral part of Canada's cultural heritage. For generations these toponyms have been preserved in the oral traditions of the community elders. However, today, the need is increasing for native toponyms, and associated background information, to be gathered and accurately inscribed in the written records.

In 1986, the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names sponsored a Native Geographical Names Symposium, at which 27 resolutions were adopted; these were later endorsed by the CPCGN as a whole. Seven of the resolutions addressed the subject of writing native toponyms and recommended that:

- the specific writing characteristics of native languages be reflected in the orthography of geographical names;

- documentation be prepared to explain the writing systems and pronunciation of native languages; and

- generic terms may be translated and geographical names may be otherwise shortened, only if the meaning of such toponyms is in no way modified or affected.

In considering the implementation of such resolutions, it is important for the CPCGN, as the national names authority, to harmonize the objectives of standardization of geographical names with a respect for native traditions and the special characteristics of native languages.

Statistics Canada's 1986 population data show nearly 712 000 of Canada's total population of 25 million as being of aboriginal origin. For the same year, statistics for languages spoken in Canada show 53 native languages (with various dialects) falling into 11 separate families: Algonquian, Athapaskan, Eskimo-Aleut, Haida, Iroquoian, Kutenai, Salishan, Siouan, Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Wakashan. According to statistics of the early 1980s, one in two native people has retained knowledge of his/her mother tongue.[1]

Some of Canada's native languages have well-established written forms. In these areas locally-used toponyms have been recorded, written in a standard form, and approved through the authority of individual CPCGN members. For example, in *Le toponyme* of October 1989,[2] the Commission .de toponymie du Québec noted that 5 303 Amerindian toponyms had been gathered in special studies and approved for official use. Of these, 2 591 are Cree toponyms and 1 178 are Montagnais (both languages of the Algonquian family). These official toponyms are written in Roman orthography and contain only diacritics found in the French language.

Languages of the Athapaskan family pose rather more questions to the geographical names authorities. Various texts have been published in languages of this family. Few, however, deal directly with geographical names. One exception is Gertie Tom's *Ekeyt Gyò Cho Chû / My Country: Big Salmon River*,[3] written in Northern Tutchone and English. Considerable ongoing work on Athhapaskan languages of the Yukon Territory is being undertaken through the Yukon Native Language Centre (in Whitehorse), publishers of this book. To represent adequately all the sounds in Northern Tutchone, diacritics are included to signify consonant sounds (e.g. t', Ⱡ), vowel sounds (e.g. ä, į), and vowel tones (e.g. ú, ö, è). Combination forms (e.g. ä̀, ę́) may be needed in the written word.

In the Northwest Territories, a Task Force on Aboriginal Languages recommended in 1986 that writing systems for the five Athapaskan (or Dene) languages spoken in the Northwest Territories should be standardized within ten years. As a result, the Dene Standardization Project was initiated in 1987.[4] Chipewyan, Dogrib, Gwich'in (Loucheux), North Slavey and South Slavey are recognized as official

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1 (1988): *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Second edition, Volume III, Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton, "Native people, languages", pp. 1453-1455.

2 Commission de toponymie du Québec (1989): *Le toponyme*, volume 7, numéro 2, Québec, p. 4.

3 Tom, Gertie (1987): *Ekeyt Gyò Cho Chû / My Country: Big Salmon River*, Yukon Native Language Centre, Whitehorse.

4 Government of the Northwest Territories (1989): *Report of the Dene Standardization Project*, Language Bureau, Department of Culture and Communications, Yellowknife, manuscript.

languages under the N.W.T. *Official Languages Act* (1984, revised 1986). Various written systems for these languages have been available for some years, following the work of linguists and Dene language speakers in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Today's standardization challenge is to select, for each language and dialect, a system which will conform to a standard across all five Dene languages. Like Northern Tutchone, the alphabets of these writing systems are based on the principle of one-to-one correspondence between symbol and sound. Again, to represent accurately the sound systems of the languages, these alphabets contain diacritics not used in the English or French languages. Vowels, for example, may have multiple diacritics to indicate both tone and nasalization (e.g. ǫ́), and characters unfamiliar to anglophones or francophones (e.g. ʔ) are needed.

In considering standardization and approval of official geographical names, the CPCGN recognizes that a name should respect the special characteristics of a native language, while at the same time communicate to non-speakers of the language, and hopefully allow a reasonable chance of a fairly accurate pronunciation of the name.

As the CPCGN is responsible for providing official names for the use of the Canadian mapping authorities, members of the Advisory Committee on Toponymy Research (ACTR) recommended that a pilot project be undertaken to obtain some feedback from map users on the representation of native toponyms on cartographic products - in particular the National Topographic System (NTS) sheets.

In 1990, this project was narrowed down to an Athapaskan-speaking area of the Mackenzie River valley in the Northwest Territories. The aim was to seek feedback from map users on various ways in which native names might be shown on 1:50 000 topographic maps. It was hoped that the responses would provide some insight into meeting the challenge of respecting the language of a relatively small number of people, while communicating effectively to a large number of people at national and international levels. With the inclusion of characters non-standard to the English or French languages, and the possibility of exclusion of generic terms in English or French, map users would have the opportunity to express their views on implications to the reading and understanding NTS maps.

This pilot project was not concerned with the use of syllabics (Inuktitut or Cree) as a means of recording names, nor was it directly aimed at the question of recognizing "alternate" unofficial forms of names.

The Northwest Territories Toponymy Program, of the Department of Culture and Communications of the N.W.T., undertook this project with the assistance of the Secretariat and the help of federal finances. For the study, an area in the Mackenzie River valley, northwest of Fort Simpson, was selected. The terrain included low islands in the Mackenzie River, a small tributary, and mountains rising to some 400 m. The NTS multicolour map 95 J/11 portrays the landscape at a scale of 1:50 000. On the current edition of the map only a few features are named, for example, Bell Ridge, Willowlake River, and McGern Island. These names were approved in 1962, 1951, and 1945, respectively. There are very few permanent residents, but the South Slavey people of Fort Simpson use the area on a seasonal basis.

In the field, names were gathered for physical features throughout the area. For ease of distributing materials for the purpose of the survey, however, only a small section of the map was selected. This particular portion included 17 recorded names: five islands, five rivers or creeks, five lakes, one point, and one mountain ridge.

Writing native names where a standardized form of the written language is not yet completely supported and used by all government and native authorities poses various problems - several were addressed in the questionnaire. How does a map-user "relate" to diacritics and characters which are not familiar to him/her and are of unknown pronounciation? Does the map user find any help in some sort of pronounciation guide? Does it make a notable difference if generics in a familiar language are attached to the native name? What sort of reaction would map users have, if the names used by the native people were written without diacritics of any sort, or written in some sort of phonetic English-language form?

Six maps were prepared, portraying the toponyms in various ways:

A   Standard orthography

B   Standard orthography with English generics (replacing native generics)

C   'Folk' (or popularized) phonetics

D   Royal Geographical Society (RGS) II phonetics

E   Standard orthography plus local English-language names

F   'Folk' (or popularized) phonetics with English generics

Four examples have been selected to indicate how names would differ on the six maps.

Map	#1	#2	#3	#4
A	Deh Cho	Tsá tǐ	Ndi t'áa	Xah ndaa shih
B	Cho River	Tsá Lake	Táa Island	Xah ndaa Mountain

C	Day Cho	Tsa tee	Ndee ta	Ha nda shee
D	Deh Chu	Tsá tí	Ndi t'áa	Ha ndaa shí
E	Deh Cho/ Mackenzie River/Fleuve Mackenzie	Tsá tí/ Beaver Lake	Ndi t'áa	Xah ndaa shih/ Bell Ridge
F	Cho River	Tsa Lake	Ta Island	Ha nda Mountain

In the questionnaire accompanying the maps, individuals were first asked about their language abilities, their use of topographic maps, and the importance they attached to (a) correct pronunciation of names from a map, and (b) correct spelling of names on a map.

For each of the six maps, questions were then posed on the way in which the map communicated: the ease of identifying the type of features named; the usefulness of a pronunciation guide; the loss of communication where diacritics non-standard to English or French were used; the loss of understanding if no English or French generics were included and the usefulness of a generics guide; and the problem of overcrowding if more than one name were shown for any one feature. Finally, individuals were asked to rate the usefulness of the six maps, and to provide helpful cartographic suggestions to aid communication if names in standard orthography, with no English- or French-language generics, were to become the official forms.

The selection of recipients for questionnaires was an item of discussion. This pilot project could not be undertaken as a full-scale national survey. However, in mailing out questionnaires the Secretariat, with the input of ACTR members, selected probable map users from all parts of Canada, from the native community, from academia, from government authorities (including departments concerned with geographical names), and from the general public. In addition, a few questionnaires were distributed to map users outside Canada.

Of 108 surveys mailed out, 43 (i.e. 40%) were returned. Some of the information obtained from the responses is summarized below.[5]

General Information

First language:
    70% English; 12% native languages.

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5 The figures that follow are either from the Native names questionnaire results prepared by the Toponymy Program of the Government of the Northwest Territories, or from notes on the survey results prepared by the CPCGN Secretariat.

26% were comfortable speaking English and a native language;
15% were comfortable writing English and a native language.

Use of topographic maps:
    68% used maps often or very often;
    88% used maps for professional purposes.

Correct pronunciation of geographical names:
    80% considered this to be *important* or *very important*

Correct spelling of names:
    98% viewed this as *important* or *very important.*

Map A - Standard orthography

Identification of features:
    52% found this *easy* or *very easy*;
    48% said that they were able to do this *with difficulty* or *not at all.*

Accompanying generic guide:
    86% found that a guide made interpretation *easier* or *much easier.*

Pronunciation guide:
(a) 35% used it *often* or *very often*;
     44% used it *seldom* or *never*;
(b) 33% thought that their pronunciation was *often* or *very often* correct;
     25% thought that their pronunciation was *seldom* or *never* correct.

Inclusion of non-standard diacritics:
    36% thought that they *probably* or *definitely* detract from communication of the map;
    50% thought that they did not.

However:
    55% felt that *probably* or *definitely* the use of standard orthographic forms of the names detracted from their personal use of the map;
    45% did not feel this to be the case.

General comments on Map A varied from finding the map easy to use, to feeling that a non-Dene or non-local user would find the map difficult to understand.

Map B - Standard orthography with English generics

Combination of languages:
    56% found this to be *probably* or *definitely* acceptable;
    27% found this unacceptable.

Generics:
46% felt that generics *probably* or *definitely* need to be in English for clear identification of features;
47% felt English generics not be necessary.

Map-user needs and local name usage:
31% thought that the needs of the map user *should* take precedence;
45% felt that map-user needs should not take precedence.

In general, a number of comments indicated that replacement of a native-language generic by an English- (or French-) language generic did not serve either the map-user community or the native groups.

Map C - 'Folk' (or popularized) phonetics

Popularized phonetics:
41% thought that the phonetics *probably* or *definitely* provided a satisfactory pronunciation;
29% thought that they did not.

Lack of representation of some Slavey sounds:
44% saw this as *probably* or *definitely* detracting from their use of the map;
17% did not see this as a problem.

General comments ranged from feeling that such a system helped render a more universal understanding to dislike of a compromise that could be confusing and used a language incorrectly.

Map D - Royal Geographical Society (RGS) II phonetics

Do RGS II ponetics on Map D offer a better alternative to Map C?
17% answered *in most cases* or *definitely* yes;
54% answered no.

Inclusion of non-standard characters:
25% thought that *in most cases* or *definitely* the non-standard characters detracted from the value of the system;
38% felt that non-standard characters were not a detraction.

It was generally thought that a system of this sort did not offer a feasible solution, and in fact, could well be misleading and compete with the orthography used in South Slavey.

Map E - Standard orthography plus local English-language names

Use of multiple official names:
36% noted that *in most cases* or *definitely* showing multiple official names was practical and/or desirable;
23% thought this was suitable *in some* cases;
41% thought that this approach was not practical or desirable.

Name overcrowding:
43% suggested that *in most cases* or *definitely* name overcrowding was of concern;
40% thought this to be a problem *in some* cases;
17% did not see this as a problem.

Some comments reflected a desire for a practical approach such as this, others stated that multiple naming was undesirable. It was suggested that multiple naming could be a suitable way of phasing out one name and introducing another.

Map F - 'Folk' (or popularized) phonetics with English generics

'Folk' phonetics plus English generics:
40% preferred this form of writing to that used in Map B;
30% preferred Map B;
25% did not like either this map or Map B.

Rating the usefulness of the six maps

How points were awarded for usefulness of maps

Map	Points *(low)*	1	2	3	4	5	(high)	%
A		21	15	15	15	34	-->	100
B		18	13	21	33	15	-->	100
C		35	30	14	19	2	-->	100
D		36	31	23	7	3	-->	100
E		24	24	16	6	30	-->	100
F		32	13	21	11	23	-->	100

From this tabulation of information received from the responses to the questionnaire, one can readily see that Maps C and D, using 'folk' (popular) phonetics and RGS II phonetics, received low evaluations. Interpretation of the points awarded to Maps A, B, E, and F is not as easy. However, standard orthography (Map A) was given the highest percentage of maximum marks - 34%. Even counting the percentage of responses that were awarded four points, Map A with standard orthography was still the favoured approach.

The standard orthography with the addition of local English-language names (Map E) also received a relatively high percentage of the maximum scores for the usefulness of the map. Standard orthography with substituted English-language generics only had 15% of respondents giving the top rating of five, but was well supported by 33% at the four level.

The total points awarded to each map ties in quite closely with the above figures. Maps A, B and E were very closely grouped, Map F was lower down the scale, and Maps C and D were at the bottom.

	Map	Points
A	Standard orthography	130
B	Standard orthography plus English generics	129
E	Standard orthography plus local English names	125
F	'Folk' phonetics plus English generics	113
C	'Folk' phonetics	92
D	RGS II phonetics	83

Several interesting comments were provided as suggestions for cartographic presentation, if the standard orthographic forms in Map A were to become the offical names. Glossaries or tables of equivalents were requested; the use of symbols to indicate feature locations was proposed; and the inclusion (in some way) of English-language generics, pronunciations, and translations was recommended.

Combining forms of names used on the various maps appeared *suitable* or *possibly so* to 56% of questionnaire respondents, but not so to 35%.

Respondents to the questionnaire

The breakdown of respondents by groups may be of interest to readers:

	% mailed out	% responded
native people	22	14
academia	26	16
government (including CPCGN)	20	37
public	32	33

Of these groups of people participating:
native people - 50% gave maximum score of 5 to Map A;
academia - 71% gave maximum score of 5 to Map A;

government (including CPCGN) - 40% gave maximum score of 5 to Map E;
public - 40% gave maximum score of 5 to Map F.

What conclusions can we draw?

Overall results of the pilot project certainly showed that those who responded to the survey were keenly interested in protecting native culture and language, and in preserving native values in the traditions of naming places and features. At the same time there was considerable concern that maps should communicate to non-local people and provide quick and unambiguous recognition of named features, to map users from the two official language groups of Canada. This in no way denies the necessity of gathering and recording native names, but underlines the importance of retaining clarity for map users. Respondents indicated clearly that correct spelling and pronunciation are both important elements.

It was evident that 'Folk' phonetics (Map C) and RGS II phonetics (Map D) were not the answer for map users. But some interweaving of standard orthography, accepted local English- (or French-) language forms, and a solution for generics have to be further studied. This pilot project did not address the inclusion of English or French generics in *addition* to the native name preserved in its entirety, a concept that has been found acceptable to native people in other areas of Canada. Neither have we truly come to terms with the difference, from a practical cartographic viewpoint, of using some diacritics (e.g. ò, ɫ, t') rather than others (e.g. ʔ) which are less easily interpreted, or some (e.g. 7.&) which have been used less formally, for example, for writing the British Columbia Lil'wat language of the Salishan family.

In discussing the results of the pilot project, the ACTR made seven recommendations on the writing of aboriginal names. These guidelines were endorsed by the CPCGN at its annual meeting in Halifax on October 12, 1990.

It was recommended that:

1. the standard orthography of aboriginal toponyms be respected;

2. those aboriginal groups who do not have a standardized orthography be urged to develop and approve such standard writing systems;

3. the principle of dual and/or alternate naming be acceptable in the aboriginal context, except in the case of populated places;

4. in keeping with UN Resolution I/4D(b), the status of each name in a dual and/or alternate context be clearly specified;
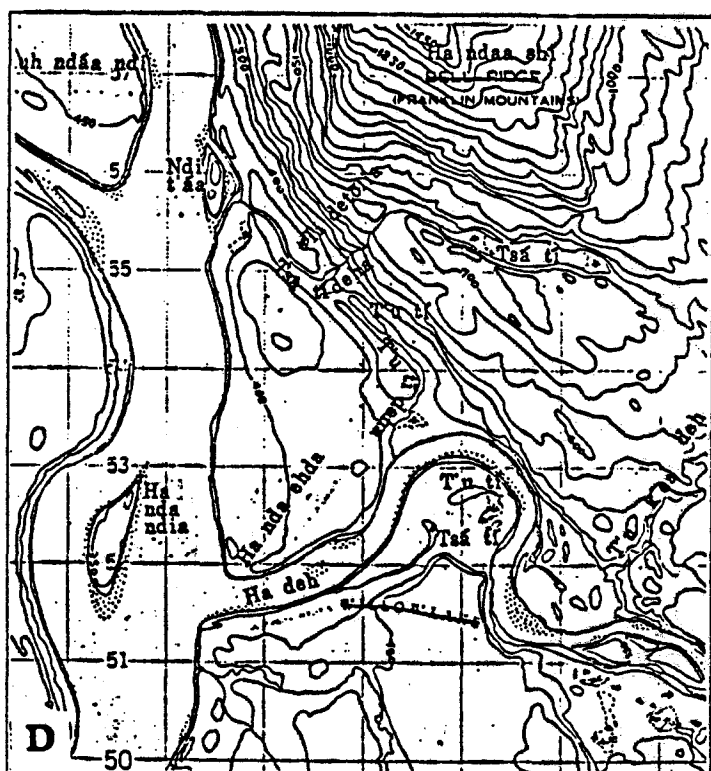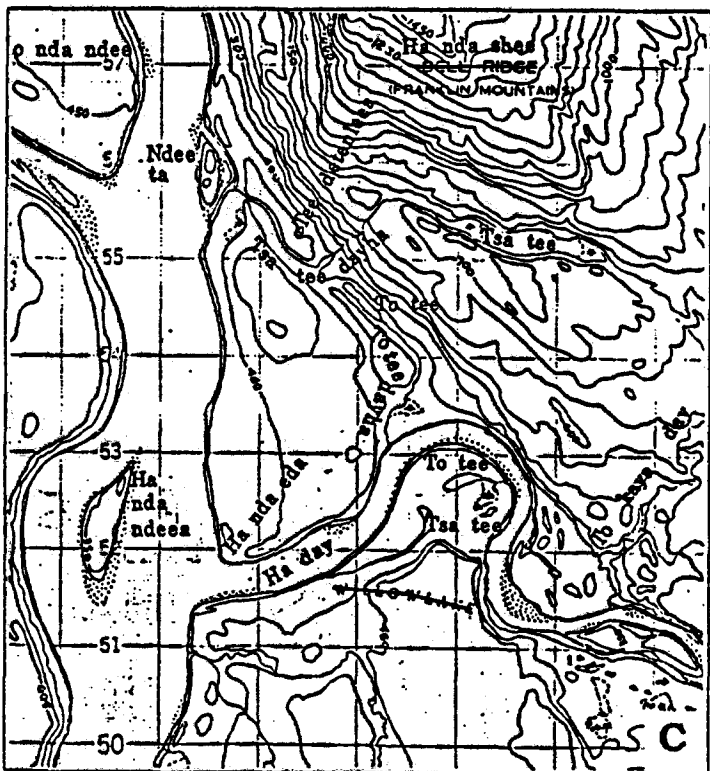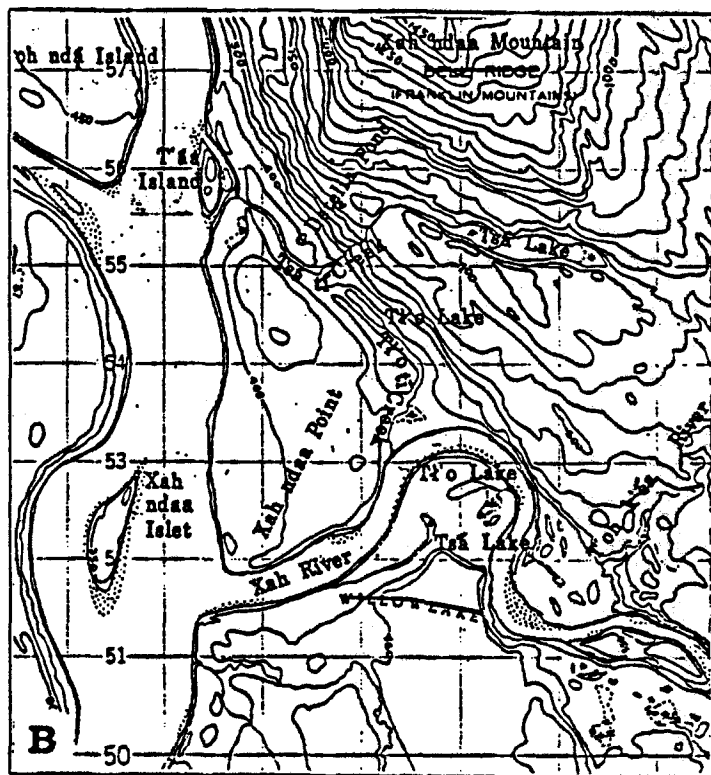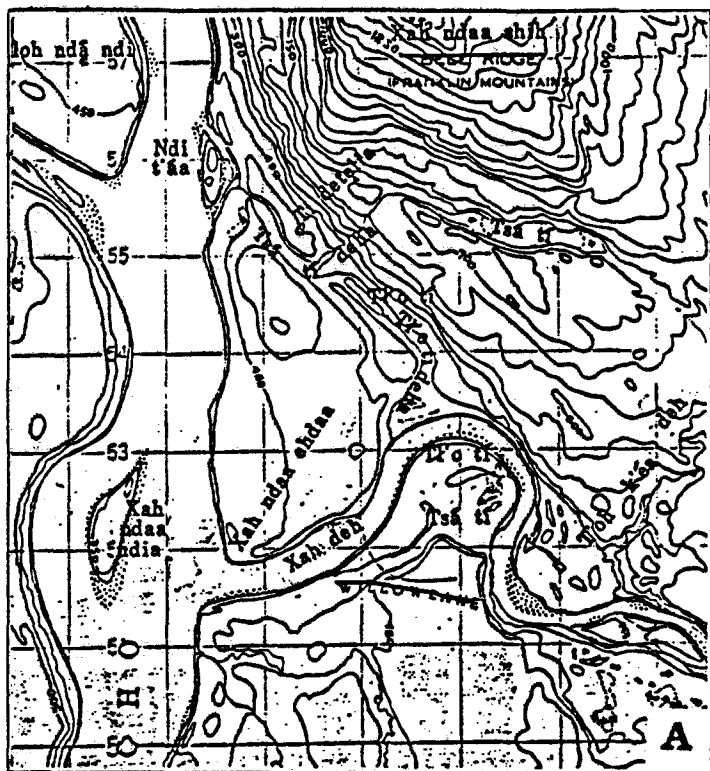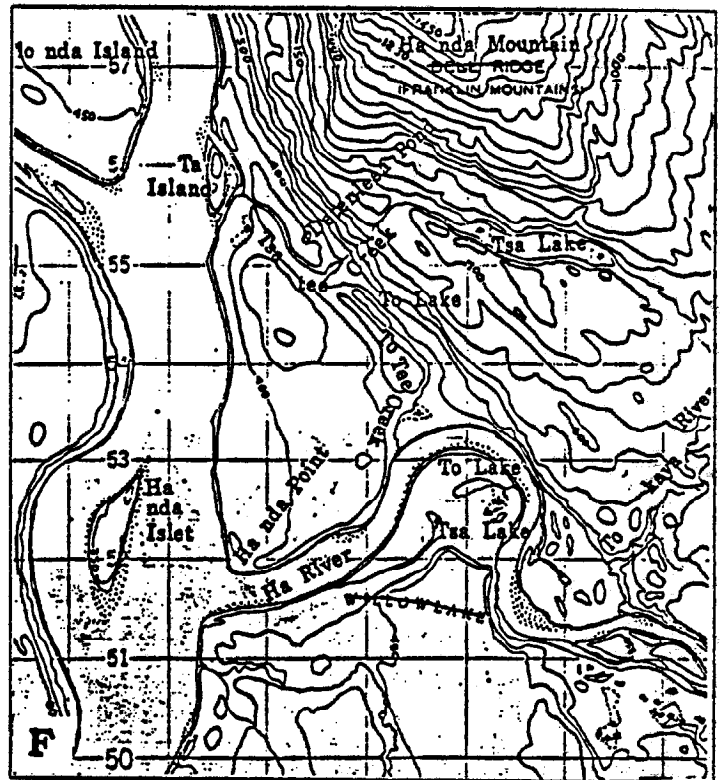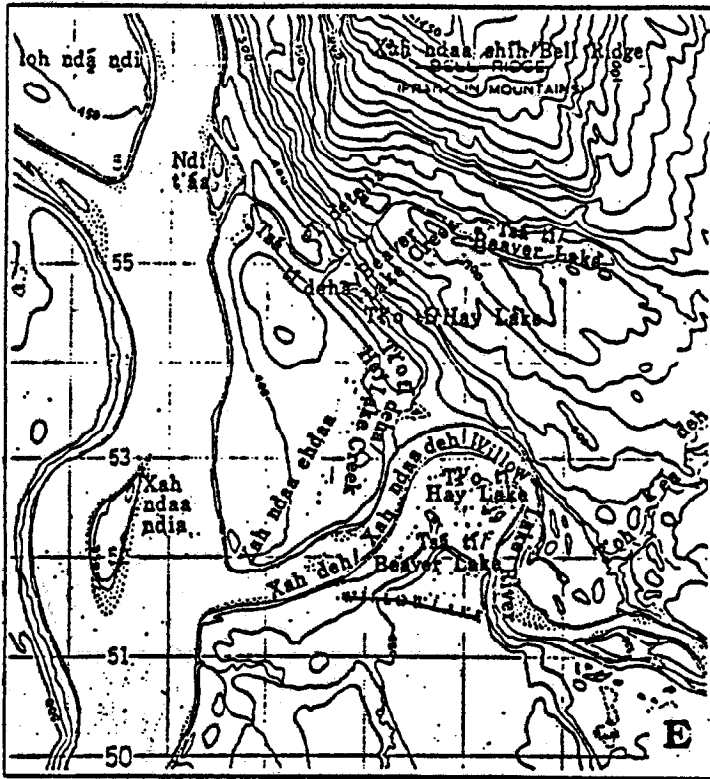
Map samples - A, B, C, D (scale reduced)

5. maps using standard aboriginal orthography be accompanied by appropriate pronunciation guidelines for non-standard (i.e. English/French) letters and/ or diacritics;

6. the issue of dual and/or alternate names be given further consideration, especially in the context of:

    a) use of English/French generics either as an addition or as a replacement for the aboriginal generic;

    b) possible orthographic adaptations of the name;

7. gazetteers incorporating aboriginal names always cross-reference dual and/or alternate forms.

Further work will be undertaken and the approval of geographical names in native languages will be given much careful consideration before major steps are taken in new directions which could have a direct bearing on national and international standardization.

Map samples - E. F (scale reduced)