REPORTS OF THE LIAISON OFFICERS, REGIONAL MEETINGS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Pan American Institute of Geography & History (PAIGH) Report

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Toponymic activity within PAIGH since the last session of the Group of Experts included publication of a geographic dictionary of Central America, and the successful presentation of two sessions of the Institute’s course on applied toponomy or geographical names.

The *Diccionario Geográfico De América Central* was published in 1999, and was a joint effort of the Pan American Institute of Geography & History, the National Geographic Institute of Honduras, and the National Geographic Institute of Spain. The volume provides the names of physical features and some administrative entities. Included in each entry is the name, extent of feature, geographical coordinates (degrees and minutes), and in many entries, there are descriptive phrases regarding the feature’s relation to other features. Also, in some entries for civil areas, a range of geographical information is provided. The dictionary is not comprehensive, but is designed to be a general reference.

Applied toponomy is the use of geographical names as a direct or supplementary means of analysis and problem solving relating to events requiring analysis and solution. The course in applied toponomy provides an introduction that should establish a sound basis for each student to further his or her knowledge of the subject and that should enable students to make valuable contributions to their national programs of names standardization. The two weeks devoted to this effort can only give an introduction to each of the major requirements for implementing a program. The possibility of offering an advanced course on specific aspects of implementing procedures is being examined. In August 1998, the course was held in Lima, Peru, and in Guatemala City, Guatemala in July 1999. These courses were highly successful with students from various civilian agencies of the National government, and from the military. Each course is limited normally to about 20 students although by special request, the course in 1999 enrolled 35 students.

The first week of the course is predominantly lecture on various aspects of applied toponomy, concentrating on the requirements for establishing a program of national standardization. The student is introduced to appropriate terminology, and provided with a short history of the development of applied toponomy. An analysis of the merits of national standardization is given, along with precise guidelines for establishing a national committee and developing principles, policies, and procedures. Also, staff requirements and office procedures are thoroughly examined. Finally, in an exercise students portray a names staff that interacts with a national names authority in applying principles and policies of standardization.
A comprehensive field exercise offers students the opportunity to gather, process, and analyze data in accordance with established toponymic field procedures. The students gain experience in solving problems associated with raw data gathering (interviews), such as local variations in naming and cultural toponymic bias. They use special, large-scale topographic maps without names created especially for the exercise. Upon returning from the field, the students receive extensive instruction in data analysis and preparation, especially regarding automated processing.

The second week is devoted to a workshop in automated data processing in which the students design databases and files, and retrieve and analyze toponymic data in a microprocessing environment. Every aspect of design is addressed to enable efficient data retrieval and analysis. Additionally, the design and production of gazetteers and other special reports are explained in detail. The student attains an understanding of automated processing as a basic tool of applied toponomy. For the first time, the course held in July 1999 offered training in the use of a relational database management system operating in a microprocessing environment.
Chronology of PAIGH Training Courses

1987 June
Panama City, Panama

1988
no course

1989 April
Quito, Ecuador

1990 November-December
Santiago, Chile

1991 November-December
Aguascalientes, Mexico

1992 October-November
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

1993 October
Tegucigalpa, Honduras

1994
no course

1995 June
Lima, Peru

1996 May
Asuncion, Paraguay

1997 May
La Paz, Bolivia

1998 August
Lima, Peru

1999 July
Guatemala City, Guatemala