

---

**UNITED NATIONS  
GROUP OF EXPERTS ON  
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES**

**CRP.7**

**Twenty-third Session  
Vienna, 28 March – 4 April 2006**

---

**Item 5 of the Provisional Agenda:  
Reports of the divisions**

**International Seminar on the Naming of Seas in 2005**

---

**Prepared by Ki-Suk Lee, Republic of Korea**

## On the Naming of Seas

The 11th International Seminar on the Naming of Seas was held at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C. on October 6 to 8, 2005. The seminar is the latest in a series of international seminars that the Korean Society for East Sea has organized to discuss the practices and principles at issue in the naming of seas. Three seminars were previously held in Paris (2004), Shanghai (2003), and Vladivostok (2002).

Approximately thirty participants in the fields of geography, history, cartography and journalism, from nine different countries (the United States, Korea, France, China, Russia, Australia, Japan, Belgium and the Netherlands) discussed issues on naming in sixteen presentations and a panel discussion during the two day meeting. Major participating figures included three former presidents of the AAG (Ronald Abler, John Adams, and Alec Murphy) David Lanegran, former president of the National Council for Geographic Education, and Chung-Tong Wu, Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Western Sydney, Australia.

The study of place names, or toponymy, has been an important research specialty field in geography. Even in the era of globalization, when the borders between countries increasingly seem to be less meaningful, such issues as national territory and international place names are attracting more interest from ordinary citizens as well as governments. The Society for the East Sea has held this series of international seminars to foster a better understanding of the principles of international standardization of geographical names.

More specifically, the seminar was organized to search for a resolution to the prolonged dispute between Korea and Japan about the name of the sea between the two countries. Korea argues that the name should be reinstated as 'East Sea,' as it was called by the Korean people for two millennia, whereas Japan wants to keep the currently accepted name, 'Sea of Japan'.

Many examples were provided from historical records of France and China as well as from Korean maps, showing that 'East Sea' or 'Sea of Korea' has more historical legitimacy than 'Sea of Japan.' Some participants cautioned, however, against the risk of forming unsupportable generalizations based on imperfect samples. Participants also noted that the name 'Sea of Japan' was an exonym that originated during the period of Japanese imperialism and its colonial reign over Korea. Participants generally agreed that giving international bodies of water the name of only one adjacent country is likely to cause disagreements and that either a neutral name or alternate names should be used in such instances.

Even though the seminar focused specifically on the name of the East Sea/ Sea of Japan, the results were more far-reaching as participants highlighted general problems in naming international geographical features. The seminar discussions also served to remind participants that toponymy deserves more attention within the study of geography.

---

\* Published Text by Ki-Suk Lee from *AAG Newsletter*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2006. 1), p.13.