

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

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**Item 16 of the Provisional Agenda:  
Activities relating to the Working Group on the  
Promotion of Indigenous and Minority Group Names**

**U.S Board on Geographic Names  
Collection and Dissemination of Indigenous Names**

**U.S. Board on Geographic Names**  
**COLLECTION and DISSEMINATION of INDIGENOUS NAMES**

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) is responsible for establishing and maintaining uniform geographical name usage throughout all departments and agencies of the United States government. As such, the Board collects and promulgates every name that is considered official for Federal use. The official vehicle for promulgating these names and their locative attributes is the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) <<http://geonames.usgs.gov>>. At present, the GNIS includes entries for the names of almost two million geographical features, both natural and manmade, along with an equal number of names categorized as “variants.” A “variant” is any name other than the official name that has been discovered on any published source. Such names can be historical or no longer used, or might be in use but less widespread, and can even include spelling or typographical errors. In accordance with the BGN’s policy of univocity, each geographical feature shall have just one official name for Federal usage, to which there is never an exception.

In addition to the official name and any variant names, each entry in GNIS includes the name of the State (or States) and County (or Counties) or County equivalent in which the feature is located, as well its geographical location (latitude and longitude, in both degrees/minutes/seconds, and in decimal form); its elevation (in feet and meters); and the name(s) of each large-scale U.S. Geological Survey topographic map on which the feature is located.

The compilation of GNIS began with the development of the National Geographic Names Database (NGNDB) in the 1970’s, and the contents were disseminated in published gazetteers, one per State. In the 1980’s, the information was stored on a mainframe database, again in State-by-State files. Over the next decade, efforts were undertaken to distribute the data via compact disk and the World Wide Web, and in the 1990’s the first online, nationwide, and searchable GNIS was developed. Downloadable digital gazetteers for each State and U.S. territory, along with topical gazetteers, were also made available.

The initial compilation of names for GNIS, during the period 1978 to 1982, involved the recording of every geographical name that appeared on the largest scale (1:24,000-scale) US Geological Survey (USGS) topographic maps available at the time. Shortly thereafter, names found on the visitors’ maps published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service and the nautical charts of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) were added to the database. Continuing through the 1980’s and 1990’s, names were compiled from other publications, such as the maps and documents of other Federal agencies; State, County, and local maps and products; published toponymic volumes; historical maps; and other available sources. Each name was entered into the database with its locative attributes, and whenever feasible, additional information that pertained to its history or description was also added. GNIS

has also long included entries for historical features; this is, natural and manmade features that no longer exist but to which a geographical name was once attached.

The compilation of GNIS is an ongoing endeavor, with new entries being added continuously, sometimes at the rate of hundreds per day. These additional names are collected from various sources, and each is forwarded to the USGS Geographic Names Office for review before being committed to the database. For over twenty years, the USGS has awarded contracts to supporting organizations to compile geographical names data and in recent years has developed ongoing maintenance agreements with Federal and State partners to acquire names from their areas of interest.

Many names in current and historical use in the United States are of indigenous origin. These include the names of many of the States (**Connecticut, Illinois, Utah**), many large American cities (**Chicago, Miami**), and numerous geographical features (**Mississippi River, Narragansett Bay, Navajo Mountain**). Throughout much of the history of the United States, these names were gathered by speakers of English and other European languages and were rendered into a more or less anglicized form, very often with little regard for the correct form or linguistic origin of the name. Since many of these indigenous names were derived from spoken languages and thus were never recorded in written form by their speakers or by those who heard them later, they often bear little resemblance to the original native language or to that which might be spoken today. Those responsible for recording and writing indigenous names for the first time were concerned almost exclusively with making them legible and pronounceable for English speakers of the area and made no effort to retain the word's linguistic characteristics.

Until the 1990's, it was also Federal policy to omit most diacritics and writing marks from placenames on Federal maps and documents. The few exceptions included the Spanish tilde and the French accent marks, but otherwise the special characters found in indigenous names were always dropped. In more recent years, however, the BGN has amended its policy to permit the inclusion of such marks, thus more accurately reflecting the true representation of the native language. An example of this has been the addition of the glottal stop (okina) and macron (kahako) to placenames of Hawaiian origin, which prior to 1995 had always been omitted. The BGN staff, under the direction and guidance of the Hawaii State Geographic Names Authority, has been restoring systemically these marks to each Hawaiian name listed in GNIS.

Over the past decade, the BGN has also received a few proposals to make official names that include writing marks from indigenous language. It is the policy of the BGN to accept such names as long as they can be rendered into the Roman alphabet.

In late 2005, the BGN was approached by a representative of the Geographic Information System (GIS) Office of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, with a request that many names of current and historical significance to the Tribe be added to GNIS and thus made official for Federal use. Since 2000, the Tribe's GIS Office has been involved in a collaborative effort with the Tribe's elders and representatives of the Tribal Language Center to gather indigenous names for geographical features located throughout traditional Coeur d'Alene

lands. This project, entitled the “Names-Places Project,” is an attempt to preserve Tribal culture, language, and knowledge, because as has been noted, a placename represents more than simply a referent to the feature; indeed, “it is the Tribe’s historical and ritual relationships to the land that create the connection” (Names-Places Project, 2002). As part of the project, the elders of the Tribe visited and described each geographical location, its history, and cultural significance. As one of the Tribal elders noted, “How can we say it’s our land when our sites are labeled with the white man’s words?” Very few members of the Tribe now speak Coeur d’Alene (“Snychitsu’umshtsn”) as their primary language, so it was suggested that one of the goals of the project should be to make the Tribe’s cultural history accessible and meaningful to future generations. As one Tribal member noted, “The culture of any people is embedded within their language. The growing concern for language revitalization is unquestionably valid. The goal of this project is to collect these place names before they disappear forever.” The Tribal Language Center is also offering instruction in Snychitsu’umshtsn, and by sharing the language with younger generations, “words and stories come back” (*ibid*).

The Coeur d’Alene Tribe’s aboriginal lands encompassed over five million acres and extend across much of the northern half of the present-day State of Idaho, as well as portions of western Montana and eastern Washington. Snychitsu’umshtsn is an Interior Salish language. Other indigenous groups in the Plateau region who also speak a Salishan language include the Colville, Flathead (Bitterroot Salish), Kalispel, Okanagon, Pend Oreille, Sanpoil, Spokane, and Wenatchee.

The Coeur d’Alene Tribe’s leadership provided funds to start the Names-Place Project, and additional grants have been received from local philanthropic organizations, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Geological Survey. To date, over 130 geographical sites have been identified, and project participants have visited over 50 of them. An important aspect of the project has been the ability to record videotapes of each site, along with audio recordings of the elders speaking the name of the place in their language. During the first two years of the project alone, the team compiled 35 hours of raw video, 30 hours of raw audio, and approximately 1,500 digital still photos. All of the information is being captured in digital form and archived in its original recorded state.

With a simple click of the mouse, a visitor to the Tribe’s website <<http://gis.cdatribe-nsn.gov/NativeNames/>> can click on a map to view the specifics of each geographical feature. In many instances, there are photographs and a video narrative describing the history and topography of the feature, along with the audio recording of the placename spoken in the Coeur d’Alene language.

In addition to preserving the visual and spoken record and producing a website, the Tribe’s GIS Office has forwarded many of the placenames and related locative material to the USGS Geographic Names Office for inclusion in GNIS. Thus far, 117 names have been submitted, reviewed, and accepted by the BGN staff. Of this number, approximately one half of the indigenous names refer to geographical features that already have official names in GNIS, and therefore, the newly-submitted name has been added to the existing entry as a variant name. Examples include **Tmts’mts’i’yelp**, a

Coeur d'Alene name for a summit already named **Round Top**, and **Hnmolshalchmqn**, the indigenous name for **Mineral Mountain**. In the case of the former name, the indigenous name has the same meaning as the English name, i.e. "round top," while in the latter example, the native name translates as "ridge in [a] concave wall," and thus presumably has no relation to the existing English name. In both cases, the native variant name is recorded exactly as spoken and submitted by the Coeur d'Alene, that is, without the addition of an English generic term. A third example, **Snt'ut'u'lmkhwkwe'**, is recorded as a variant of the name **Hangman Creek**. The native name, which means "Suckers in the Water," has no relation to the existing English name, yet another of the variant names for **Hangman Creek**, already recorded in GNIS, is **Latah Creek**; this name is also of indigenous origin and translates as "jumping fish [creek]," which presumably has a similar linguistic derivation to the newly-added Coeur d'Alene variant name. Several of the indigenous names apply to large centers of population, such as **Hnt'achqn** and **S'maqw'l** for the cities of **Plummer** and **Moscow**, Idaho, respectively; **Hnme'suuli** for **Missoula**, Montana; and **Sile'** for **Cheney**, Washington. The GIS Office has reassured the BGN that there is no desire to change any of the existing English names in favor of the Coeur d'Alene names even though toponymic due process allows such a proposal to be made and reviewed.

The remaining names submitted to the USGS Geographic Names Office by the GIS Office are for geographical features that are not currently identified by English names on available maps or in the database. These names have been added to GNIS as new entries. In an effort to aid those users of GNIS and maps who are not familiar with the Coeur d'Alene language, and in accordance with BGN policy, an appropriate generic word (such as "Mountain," "Hill," or "Creek") has been added to these names. As with all GNIS entries, each new entry provides the geographical coordinates of the feature, a reference to the appropriate State and County, the name of the USGS topographic map on which the feature is located, and the English translation of the indigenous name. Examples include **Chat'u'washa'lqs Bluff**, translated as "Little dwelling on the Spur," and **Lq'e'ykwe' Rapid**, "Design on the Water." In a few instances, further analysis has determined that the geographical feature in question no longer exists, and these are categorized in GNIS as "historical." These are primarily communities that are no longer inhabited or locales that have been inundated by the creation of a new body of water or the redirection of a stream. As further research is conducted into the history of these sites, additional details may be added to the database entry.

According to the Tribe's website, "The Names-Places Project is working diligently to record digitally, preserve, and store this oral heritage," because as one Coeur d'Alene elder remarked, "the soul of our tribe is those mountains and those waters."