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The development of a toponymy programme for
Canada's Northwest Territories**

Paper submitted by Canada

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Canada's Northwest Territories is the vast, largely untamed, northern third of Canada. This land of sub-arctic forest and arctic tundra covers almost 3.4 million square kilometres or nearly double the size of western Europe. Within this seemingly infinite space reside a mere 52,000 individuals. Even though sixty percent of the population is of aboriginal descent the common language of the north is English. Also spoken, and considered as official languages of the Northwest Territories, are Inuktitut, North Slavey, South Slavey, Dogrib, Chipewyan, Loucheux, and Cree.

The standardization of geographical names in the Northwest Territories was, until 1984, the responsibility of the Federal Government. They assigned one individual, whose office was located in Ottawa, the task of dealing with all questions of geographical nomenclature affecting the Northwest Territories, the Yukon, and all federal lands in Canada. In January of 1984 the Federal Government offered to transfer its responsibility for the officialization of names for geographical features and populated places in the Northwest Territories to the Government of the Northwest Territories. This offer was accepted and in 1985 I was given the task of establishing a toponymy program for the Northwest Territories. I was to attempt to determine all the locally used native names for geographical features in the Northwest Territories, to officialize these names, and to publish the results of the toponymic studies that were undertaken. The object of establishing a toponymy program of this nature was to ensure that the geographical names appearing on maps and in publications were a reflection of the diverse native cultures and languages of Canada's north.

An examination of 90 years of name officialization in the Northwest Territories has revealed some major problems with both the quantity and type of names that were approved in the past. The majority of the approximate fifteen thousand officially recognized geographical names in the Northwest Territories appear to have been imposed upon those features without regard for, or consultation with, members of the local population. There are numerous examples of where a local native name for a geographical feature was known but passed over in favour of a non-native name. In most cases where this has occurred the locally established name, which may have been in use for hundreds or perhaps thousands of years, has continued in use. There are also many examples of where the official non-native name and the local native name are both used, though often under different circumstances, by local people! One such example is the name Mackenzie River. The Dene people living along the river often use the name *Deh Cho* when speaking among themselves in their native language and Mackenzie when speaking in English.

Evidence supporting the above has been gathered during a number of recent field studies. One particular study, conducted in the spring of 1986, appears to reflect the normal situation in the north with regards to names and naming. Interviews with residents of the Mackenzie valley south of the small Dene community of Wrigley revealed a total of 140 local geographical names for features within the immediate area. Of these 140 names, all of which were well known to the Dene people of the area and had been in use for many generations, only 6 were shown as official names on the maps. An additional 8 names were shown as English translations of the Slavey name while the remaining 126 names or 90% were names for features that either had no official name or had the wrong name as official.

Extrapolation from the density of distribution of local names gathered during these field studies suggests that as many as 120,000 local names are in use in the Northwest Territories. It would appear that the vast majority of geographical names used by the indigenous people of the

Northwest Territories are not officially recognized and therefore do not appear on maps produced by the government or in other types of official government publications. It would also appear that a large portion of the names which do appear on official maps are either not used by local people or are used in conjunction with a local name.

The most visible of these are the names for communities. There are 64 communities in the Northwest Territories. Analysis of recent population statistics revealed that 54 of these communities have a native majority and that this majority averages 92%. A recent examination of the official names for these native majority communities has shown that, according to local residents, only two communities (Sanikiluaq and Iqaluit) have correct names; 5 communities have names that are incorrectly transcribed and therefore incorrectly pronounced (eg. Tuktoyaktuk should read *Tuktuujaartuq*); while 48 communities have official names that are either not known to or not commonly used by the residents of that community. An example of this is the small Dene community on the Mackenzie River that is officially known as Jean Marie River. The residents of this community refer to it as *Tthédzéhk'édéli*. Another example is the Inuit community of Pond Inlet on Baffin Island. Residents of this community commonly refer to it as *Mittimatalik*.

The residents of one Northwest Territories town recently voted to change their official name to the local Inuit name for the community. On January 1, 1987 the Town of *Frobisher Bay* became the Town of Iqaluit. This town appears to have successfully weathered the difficulties often associated with a name change and is being used as an example by local individuals and organizations wishing to have native names officialized for their own predominantly native communities.

Program duties and responsibilities

The four major responsibilities of the NWT Toponymic Program are:

- (1) to receive and process requests from the public to name geographical features (both physical features and populated places);

- (2) to conduct systematic toponymic field studies of selected areas of the NWT;
- (3) to review and process toponymic data gathered through independent research projects; and
- (4) to disseminate toponymic data through answering specific questions posed by the public and through the production of written material made readily available to the public.

The function that binds these major areas of responsibility is that of toponymic research. This research, both field and archival, will be used to supplement and verify the information provided by a name initiator; will enable large numbers of name approvals and map corrections; and will provide the necessary data for publications and name queries. As it is anticipated that the majority of names gathered in the field will be of Native origin the people who will benefit the most from the research of this program will be the indigenous people of the Northwest Territories. The gathering, study, and approval of these names will enhance an aspect of native culture and history that has largely been ignored in the past. Since place names are used by all people it will also provide a means by which these unique cultural indicators can be transmitted to, and understood by, all Canadians.

Additional duties and responsibilities of the NWT Toponymic Program include;

1. continued development and maintenance of a toponymic data base;
2. continued development of new ways and means of toponymic data dissemination;
3. continued development and maintenance of a functional liaison with federal, provincial, and territorial mapping and/or toponymic departments; and,
4. continued participation in the development of

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toponymic policy by the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names and its sub-committees (Advisory Committee on Toponymic Research, Advisory Committee on Glacial and Alpine Nomenclature, and the Advisory Committee on Undersea Feature Names).

Toponymic coverage of the NWT

The gathering of toponymic data in the field will be based upon interviewing knowledgeable local residents. With each passing year there are fewer individuals who are cognizant of the origins, meanings, and cultural significance of local geographical names. Much of this valuable cultural information has already been lost. Given the perceived urgency which surrounds the gathering of toponymic data in the Northwest Territories the interim method chosen to obtain this information is to encourage local organizations and/or individuals to gather data in their respective areas. This system, while far from systematic or rigorously 'scientific', will suffice until such time that a proper toponymic survey of the Northwest Territories can be conducted. The production, in the near future, of a document outlining toponymic research methodology for use by these organizations and/or individuals will hopefully result in a minimum of errors and/or omissions of data.

The mandate of the Toponymy Program, as established by the Executive Council of the Government of the Northwest Territories, is to determine the geographical names that are being used by the Amerindian and Inuit people of the Northwest Territories. My objective is not only the eventual official approval of these locally used names but more importantly is the preservation of a unique aspect of the culture and history of the original peoples of the north. Native languages, the transition from nomadic to community oriented life style, the vast unpopulated regions between the communities, and the history and exploration of non-natives in the north must all be taken into consideration when dealing with this complex problem of northern geographical names.