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COMMENTS ON THE US BGN GAZETTEERS

Submitted by the United States

1. The gazetteers produced by the US Board on Geographic Names have been the subject of considerable discussion during the current meeting of the UNGEGN. Persons participating in these discussions have freely expressed their opinions, with the result that many ideas and impressions have been set forth regarding the value and role of these documents. Some of these opinions represent fact and some represent supposed fact. In view of the great interest the gazetteers have aroused, it may be useful to present this brief paper on the origin and use of these publications.
2. As is well known, the United States has produced lists of foreign place names for many years, with the first item appearing in 1890. The need for such names, which were standardized to eliminate duplication and confusion, was recognized as important to a wide range of users, including commercial, cultural and scientific. Their appearance was a necessary adjunct to the emergence of the United States as a nation concerned with global relations. With the outset of the Second World War, the United States was confronted with a requirement for many more names than were available, and machinery to produce such names was established by the US BGN. In a remarkably short time, literally millions of names were standardized and applied to maps and related publications. These names were available to the general public without restriction.
3. Shortly after the War, the names files created by BGN were converted to the well-known gazetteer format. Faced with new concerns on a world-wide basis, the United States required new programs to compile names information. Furthermore, as the services of BGN to provide names data became known to more and more people in the nation, the demand for names information increased correspondingly.
4. This production of standardized names of foreign places was maintained and the gazetteer series was continued, until the coverage provided by these documents was considered adequate for general needs. The overall result has been the creation of a vast library of place-name information freely available to the general public.
5. These gazetteers are now and have been from the beginning intended for general governmental use and have never been adequate for military mapping at large scales. The names in the gazetteers, therefore, are similar to other kinds of data (climatic, health, etc.) which are exchanged on a world-wide basis by other international organizations for a wide variety of purposes. The expression of location to one minute of arc is in keeping with long-standing practice, as witnessed by the best and most popular general reference works. The use of latitude and longitude to a minute in BGN gazetteers is solely for general locational purposes.

6. The BGN is a board composed of several governmental agencies. Until recently the whole function was administered by the Department of the Interior. Budgetary restraints a few years ago led to a reorganization in which support of the staff of the secretariat and the work on foreign names is now funded by the Defense Mapping Agency. For this reason, gazetteers which formerly bore the imprint of the Department of the Interior now also have the Department of Defense imprint. The Department of the Interior still retains financial responsibility for publications concerning domestic names. The BGN gazetteer program is a civil obligation assigned to the Defense Mapping Agency, like the production of hydrographic charts for merchant marine use and material for civil aviation.

7. BGN gazetteers are produced as far as possible with the cooperation of the countries concerned. In most cases the names are taken from maps produced by mapping authorities in the country itself, but some maps represent cooperative efforts that include the United States. When available, lists of names produced by local authorities are also consulted, as are guide books, reference works and other similar documents. With respect to maps, it is generally the practice of the BGN to record data about all features portrayed on maps, with the result that many items of relatively minor importance are identified. Obviously a great deal of toponymic research is expended in the production of gazetteers. It is quite common to find confusing, ambiguous or even inaccurate names and terminology on maps and, as a result, intensive examination of evidence from two or more sources must be conducted to arrive at a correct solution. Generally, scales no larger than 1:250,000 are employed, but larger scales may be used for small, densely populated countries - if coverage at such scales is available. Maps and other documents that are used by BGN toponymists are normally available to the public.

8. BGN has produced gazetteers for some states of the United States and is working on others. When completed, this program will constitute a BGN gazetteer of the United States. In the meantime BGN issues periodic lists of decisions on domestic names that appear on maps, including those at large scales, and in other government material available to the public.