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English only

**Eighth United Nations Conference on the
Standardization of Geographical Names**

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Item 7 of the provisional agenda*

**Measures taken and proposed to implement
United Nations resolutions on the
standardization of geographical names**

**Aboriginal place names — the recording process in
South Australia**

Submitted by Australia**

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Introduction

In 1986, I prepared a paper for the Fifth United Nations Conference on the Standardisation of Geographical Names, held in Montreal, Canada entitled "Traditional Aboriginal Place Names – Their Recording and Use".

A paper on a similar subject was also presented by Canada, and I like to believe that my paper contributed in some way to the passing of the following resolution at the above-mentioned conference:

The Conference,

Aware that groups of aboriginal/native people exist in many countries throughout the world,

Also aware that these groups have their own languages, cultures and traditions,

Recognizing that the geographical names of these groups are a significant part of the toponymic traditions of every area or country in which they live,

Recognizing also that aboriginal/native people have an inherent interest in having their geographical nomenclature recognized as important,

1. **Recommends** that all countries having groups of aboriginal/native people make a special effort to collect their geographical names along with other appropriate information;

2. **Recommends also** that, whenever possible and appropriate, a written form of those names be adopted for official use on maps and other publications;

3. **Recommends further** that regional and international meetings be held to discuss the methodology for collecting and recording aboriginal/native geographical names.

I have been asked by the Committee for Geographical Names In Australasia to prepare a follow up paper, indicating what has been done in Australia, and more particularly in South Australia in relation to the implementation of this resolution.

My initial paper, although it set a direction for the work in South Australia, was in hindsight, largely a theoretical approach to the issue. Given the passage of some 16 years and the implementation of programs aimed at the recording of traditional indigenous place names and integrating them within the general State geographic

nomenclature, I am now able to talk on this issue with a degree of practical experience.

Progress in Australia

The recording and use of traditional indigenous place names has been identified as one of the most significant issues facing the State and Territory place naming authorities. As such, it is always a point of discussion at the national coordinating meetings.

From an Australia-wide perspective, the creation of a series of guidelines on this issue was regarded as a major step in formulating standard procedures. These guidelines were first presented to a national forum in 1992 and have since been adopted by all State and Territory authorities as the basis for any recording programs.

The two foundation principles of the guidelines are:

- The need for appropriate consultation procedures.
- A recognition of the right of the indigenous people to make decisions regarding their own heritage and to be able to authorise the use of their names in a more public domain.

The project work undertaken varies from State to State, subject to the availability of opportunities and of resources.

Projects in other States and Territories include the following:

- Recording, verifying and updating community names in Northern Territory.
- Recording of traditional names on Groote Eylandt, Northern Territory.
- Investigation into possible dual naming of features in Sydney Harbour.
- Dual naming of certain features in the Grampian Ranges in Victoria
- Field collection of place names in Western Australia.
- Collection and use of traditional names in Queensland and Tasmania as required for specific proposals.

South Australian Projects.

In South Australia, fieldwork for the recording and use of traditional Aboriginal place names commenced in 1985.

Legislation was passed in the State Parliament in 1991 to enable a dual naming system to be introduced, whereby a feature can have both the traditional Aboriginal name and a name from another source assigned to it. At present, there are over 600 features in South Australia where dual naming has or can be instituted.

In practice, both names or either name can be used. In the printing of the names on maps or on signs, both names should appear, with the name in greater use by the local community preceding the other.

The following two examples may explain this clearer:

- a) The river running through Adelaide has recently been dual named with the names "River Torrens / Karrawirra Parri". River Torrens (the European name) is the name in most common use by the local community, therefore the name should be shown as indicated above when used in a written form.
- b) The highest mountain in South Australia is located in the northwest portion of the State, within the Pitjantjatjara Lands. It is also dual named with the written form being "Ngarutjaranya / Mount Woodroffe". Ngarutjaranya (the Pitjantjatjara name) is the name in most common local use.

Projects in South Australia can be divided into two basic types:

- Recording in the field – requiring that a degree of traditional knowledge still exists among the community members and that individuals with the authority to pass on the information are available. Historical research is undertaken prior to the fieldwork, using early mapping and surveys and any previous anthropological or linguistic work undertaken.

Initially, the field team consisted of:

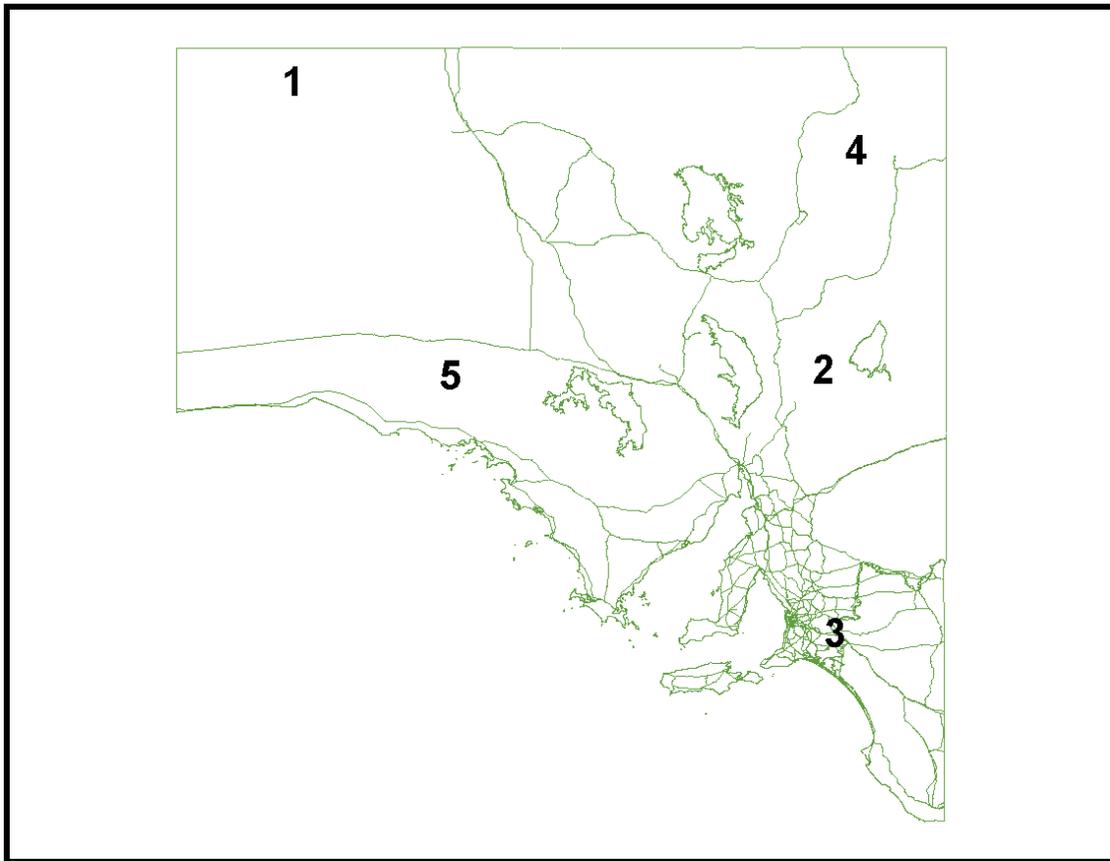
- Aboriginal people from the subject area able provide the information to be recorded;
- A linguist or anthropologist acceptable to the Aboriginal community whose role was to record the information in a written form; and
- A mapping expert to record the locations accurately.

However, the expansion of Global Positioning System technology has reduced the need of the third person from a mapping perspective.

- Recording from data previously compiled by anthropologists, linguists and other interested individuals. This is particularly useful in the areas where the traditional knowledge has significantly diminished. In these instances, the indigenous communities often see the reintroduction of information from these sources as a 'regaining' of aspects of their heritage.

The table and map below outlines projects, either completed or in progress, Within South Australia.

Number	Project	Comments
1	Field trips to the Pitjantjatjara Lands	Three field trips have been undertaken, each lasting 2 – 3 weeks in duration. The focus was the ranges on the north and north-eastern edges of the Great Victoria Desert. Some 700 new names were collected, as well as the recording of more accurate spellings for names in existing use and the clarification of the locations of many features.
2	Field trips to the North Flinders Ranges with the Adnymathanha people	In all, five trips to this area have been undertaken. The purpose was mainly to map the dreaming stories on the landscape. This was a very successful project, resulting in a significant body of information being accurately recorded prior to the deaths of many of the older people who were the custodians of the knowledge. Over 300 new names were recorded and the spelling of hundreds of other features clarified.
3	Information relating to the Yaralde people as recorded by Dr Norman Tindale, Anthropologist.	Some 200 place names were extracted from the information gathered by Tindale relating to this language group, then plotted onto current topographical mapping to obtain a current location.
4	Information from Reuter's manuscript (a German missionary stationed at the Killalpaninna Mission in the 1870's) and the map prepared by a Mr Hillier from the information collected by Reuter.	Over 2900 place names are recorded in this journal, together with the meaning and their associations with mythology. These are being located as accurately as possible using office-based techniques (mainly GIS methods) for subsequent verification in the field if possible.
5	Field trips to the Wirangu people	Two field trips have been undertaken, each of 2 weeks duration. Approximately 400 new names were recorded as well as the accurate spellings and locations of many others.
State Wide	Extraction of information from the work of Norman Tindale, Anthropologist.	Over 2400 additional names have been obtained from Tindale's work, covering the whole of South Australia as well as information from other parts of the country. All of the names need to be collated, located and relevant consultation undertaken with communities prior to any public use.



Questions Asked and Lessons Learnt

Why are you doing this?

This is usually the first question I am asked when I approach Aboriginal people or communities seeking assistance with specific proposals.

If such a task is to be undertaken, I believe that the motivation for this work needs to be clearly established by the relevant nomenclature authority.

The South Australian Geographical Names Board discussed this at length in 1985 when the idea of recording traditional indigenous place names was first raised by a linguist working in the Flinders Ranges with the Adnymathanha people.

A decision was made to find ways to better represent Aboriginal heritage within the geographical place names of the State. This was not made lightly, as a number of obstacles were immediately recognised, including:

- Availability of staff and other resources.
- Cultural sensitivities and prejudices.
- Overcoming traditions.
- Obvious differences in naming practices utilised by the two cultures.

However, I have found that all the obstacles identified so far can be overcome on the following basis:

- That the initial decision is a sincere effort, rather than being perceived as a token exercise.
- That all due respect is given to the rights of the indigenous peoples to make their own decisions regarding their heritage.
- That the cultural differences are accepted and respected.
- That the relationship of trust that can be built is not placed in jeopardy by careless work or thoughtless actions.

When are you going to get our names right?

The first Aboriginal person I met on the first field trip I was involved with asked me this question. He did so quietly, but with a great deal of sincerity. I feel that the Aboriginal people have a right to ask this question.

In South Australia, we have identified the following situations:

- Many traditional Aboriginal names applied to natural features have been replaced with names of European origin, yet the Aboriginal names have on some occasions been retained by the application of the names to towns, pastoral stations and other features that have no significance to Aboriginal culture.
- Spelling, and therefore the pronunciation, of some names have been amended over time to the point that they are no longer recognisable by the Aboriginal people. I have noted from examination of historical mapping that this has often happened in degrees, as names are “simplified” through general use.
- Many thousands of traditional names have not been recorded at all, and names from other cultures have been applied to features that are very significant to the Aboriginal people.

The correction of the above situations has no “quick fix”, with each situation needing to be examined as an individual proposal. However, the basis for these solutions lies in developing a respect of the culture the names are taken from. We have not “simplified” the names taken from any of the European cultures represented in the State (Eg. French, German, Welsh and Polish). I believe that it is inappropriate to consider any alternative policy for names of Aboriginal origin.

What do we gain?

The question has been asked by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

For the Aboriginal people, the greater use of traditional indigenous place names in the general geographic nomenclature provides a window into Aboriginal heritage for the rest of the community. The greater the use, the greater the opportunity and incentive for others to ask about the names and thereby gain greater insight into Aboriginal culture.

A logical extension of this is the ability for Aboriginal people, particularly within national parks, to provide cultural interpretations of the landscape for those visiting the area.

As mapping can show the density of place names derived from the indigenous culture, we can create a visual picture for the rest of the community, highlighting the strength of the association of the Aboriginal people with the land.

For those of us who are not of Aboriginal origin, if we have a desire to take our personal association with our land any earlier than 1836 (the date of European settlement in South Australia), we need to identify in some way with the Aboriginal association with the land.

Appropriate use of traditional indigenous place names has provided a non-threatening means of providing such a window. The wide acceptance evident for the dual naming, even of the major features in the State, indicates how prepared the general community is to move in this direction.

Unresolved Issues and Future directions

There are still some significant issues that require further effort to develop procedures and create an environment where these issues will not become significant problems.

Cultural Erosion / Cultural Revitalisation

Many of the indigenous communities are reaching a point in time where the remaining custodians of traditional knowledge are reaching an advanced age. If they die without passing this information to others, the knowledge will be lost. However, due to the

breakdown in traditional societies, the ability and environment suitable for the passing on of this information in the manner the elders received it is no longer viable.

How this information can be retained is a question that the Aboriginal people must answer for themselves, but it is a significant issue. All the Adnymathanha elders who were involved with the recording of the dreaming stories in the Flinders Ranges are no longer living. If the stories had not been recorded and mapped, then all that would be left would be fragments of the information we now have.

On the other hand, place names research in those areas where significant cultural erosion has occurred can assist in the revitalisation of cultural knowledge among the indigenous people.

Particularly if meanings are known, then comparative linguistic research can use related languages to assist in language retention programs. In many cases, the extraction of all the information related to a place recorded by anthropologists (and others) restores lost information.

This was evident when we entered into consultation with the relevant communities regarding the information associated with the Yaralde people obtained from Norman Tindale. Tindale not only recorded the name and meanings, but also a large amount of other information such as the daily activities of the people while at a particular site, plant and animal species and so forth. After reading the information, the comment was made to the effect that "our heritage is being restored".

Intellectual Property.

This has the potential to be a very vexing issue, but again, the answer lies in the hands of the indigenous people.

Given the importance of place names in any form of native title claims or land rights, the release of this information into the public arena is regarded by some as being fraught with risk, while others argue that it will help build a stronger case.

Either way, this issue needs to be considered very carefully. During consultation phases, I have found it beneficial to discuss that authorisation by Aboriginal communities for place names to be used as part of the general State geographic nomenclature also means that the names are in the public domain. Whereas the cultural source is still evident and there are benefits of this, there is also the risk that others may use the names in a manner that is seen as inappropriate from an Aboriginal perspective.

The time taken to find an equitable solution for this may place the recording of information in jeopardy if other action is not initiated. The State of New South Wales is

considering the concept of a Register of Aboriginal Place Names. I see this initiative as a good solution to this matter.

The basic idea of this concept is that the State nomenclature authority develops:

- Database structures together with the relevant procedures and protocols.
- Provides the training for Aboriginal people who are selected by their communities to input the data.

The information collected would be the property of the community, and access restricted or controlled by them as deemed appropriate. This would ensure that their intellectual property is protected, and also ensure that the information is recorded for posterity.

Other products can flow from this information at a pace selected by the community, including such projects as:

- GIS production of Aboriginal mapping
- Use of the relevant data for native title claims
- Release of approved information for public domain purposes, such as general naming, interpretive work in national parks, and teaching in schools.

The important point is that the intellectual property is protected by the control of this information resting with the relevant community.

Summary

In summary, it is fair to say that in South Australia we have made a start in the two most important aspects of the recording and use of indigenous place names.

We have made a start in the gathering of the information, and in bringing this part of Aboriginal heritage into greater public view and we have made a start in building positive relationships with Aboriginal communities and establishing the relationship of trust necessary to achieve positive outcomes.

This work will continue with the pace restricted only by what resources can be made available.
