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Geographical Names  
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**Item 13 of the agenda \***

**Geographical names as culture, heritage and identity, including indigenous, minority and regional languages and multilingual issues**

**(Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage)**

## **International policy scan of indigenous and minority-language geographical names**

Submitted by Canada\*\*

Summary:

The recognition and increased awareness of traditional geographical names contribute to the preservation, revitalization and strengthening of indigenous histories, languages and cultures. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that indigenous peoples have the right to designate and retain their own names for communities and places. The national naming authority of Canada, the Geographical Names Board of Canada, has a long-standing interest in researching, documenting and approving geographical names that have indigenous origins.

In early 2018, a policy scan was commissioned to examine the naming policies of a select group of countries with indigenous or minority-language populations. The full report highlights the findings of the policy scan. Policies, procedures and approaches differ in each naming jurisdiction, reflecting regional geography, history and circumstances. Consolidating the information provides invaluable material for federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities in Canada and will allow Board members to identify gaps, share best practices and work together to improve the policy framework on indigenous geographical naming in Canada.

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## **Background**

The Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) is the national coordinating body responsible for standards and policies for geographical naming in Canada. The Board is established under a federal Order in Council, and is composed of members from federal, provincial and territorial government departments and agencies, each with specific mandates and responsibilities for their respective jurisdictions. Working together as a multi-jurisdictional national body, GNBC members ensure that geographical names are consistently managed in Canada. The GNBC is supported by a Secretariat provided by Natural Resources Canada (NRCan), a department of the Government of Canada.

## **Origins of the Indigenous Policy Scan**

In 2017, a national policy scan was commissioned to examine the approach by federal, provincial and territorial jurisdictions to Indigenous place naming in Canada. The study found that:

- Policies, procedures and approaches differ in each naming jurisdiction in Canada, reflecting regional geography, history and circumstances.
- All Canadian naming jurisdictions have policy guidelines that can accommodate some, but not all, aspects of an Indigenous naming policy. Most do not have a separate Indigenous names policy, although many of them have such a policy in development.
- All Canadian naming jurisdictions welcome and encourage Indigenous participation in the naming process and have consultation policies and procedures in place for naming.
- All naming authorities encourage research by various cultural and linguistic specialists and the greater involvement of Indigenous representatives in an effort to improve knowledge of Indigenous geographical naming traditions.
- Some naming authorities have benefited from various collection and inventory projects that they have supported. In recent years, many Indigenous groups across Canada have started projects to collect their own geographical names in Indigenous languages. A number of these projects have already resulted in name submissions, and new official names.

To supplement the national scan, an international policy scan was commissioned in 2018. A consultant with strong experience in Indigenous toponymy was engaged by Natural Resources Canada to conduct the work. GNBC members were interested in the approaches to Indigenous and minority-language geographical naming in other international jurisdictions. The purpose of this survey was to research, document, analyze and summarize policies and procedures used by a selection of national and subnational naming authorities to officially preserve and protect the language, culture and history of Indigenous and/or minority place names. In the future, the results of the survey will be analyzed to assist the GNBC in establishing a robust Indigenous naming policy for Canada.

## **Methodology**

Australia, China, Finland, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Russian Federation, South Africa, United Kingdom (Wales), and the United States (Hawai'i) were contacted to participate in this study. Representatives of these countries were contacted by email by Natural Resources Canada to request their participation in the survey. The consultant subsequently emailed these contacts to request telephone interviews.

At the beginning of the project, a literature review was conducted and a methods statement was prepared, including a template questionnaire based on the GNBC's questions and terms of reference for the survey. The literature review relied heavily on documentation on UNGEGN's website and web-based searches. It was discovered that while toponymic literature concerning Indigenous and minority language toponymy is quite extensive, references to policies and practices related to such toponymy seem to be sparse in many countries.

The GNBC was interested in answering the following questions:

- What policies do the naming authorities have for the collection of Indigenous or minority language geographical names? Have special policies been developed for this purpose?
- What is the consultation process with the Indigenous or minority language community in order to identify, establish and record names with Indigenous or minority language origins? Have special procedures been developed for this purpose?
- Have policies been developed to address the unique aspects of Indigenous or minority language geography and toponymy such as:
  - multiple names for a single geographical feature,
  - unique cultural generics (feature types that describe cultural places on the landscape ex. gathering place, portage, battlefield, etc.),
  - guidelines for names of “topo-complexes”, geographical features that are made up of more than one distinct feature, but identified by a single toponym?
- What are the policies and methods for accurately recording, storing, displaying and disseminating Indigenous or minority language geographical names? Have standards been adopted for special characters (diacritics) used in Indigenous or minority languages?

The consultant added supplementary questions regarding spatial extents, how toponymic research is financed, and the challenges related to such research.

## **Results**

A number of generalizations were made with respect to the place-naming policies and practices of the participating jurisdictions (Table 1).

**Table 1: Summary of place-naming policies and practices by jurisdiction**

Jurisdiction	Place Name Act	Names board, committee	Toponymic Guidelines	Indigenous representative on board	Check lists <sup>1</sup>	Proposal forms	Consultation required	Dual naming	Standard orthography	Roman orthography	Diacritics	Linguistic expertise, etc. recommended, required <sup>2</sup>
Australia, New South Wales	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	?
Australia, Northern Territory	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	?
Australia, Queensland	yes	no <sup>3</sup>	yes	no	no	yes	?	yes	yes	yes	no	?
Australia, South Australia	yes	no <sup>4</sup>	yes	no	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Australia, Tasmania	yes	yes	yes	no	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	?
Australia, Victoria	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	?
Australia, Western Australia	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	?
China	yes	yes	yes	?	?	?	?	?	yes	?	?	?
Finland	no	no	?	n/a	?	?	?	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Ireland	no <sup>5</sup>	yes	no	n/a	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
New Zealand	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	?
UK, Wales	no	no	yes	n/a	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes

<sup>1</sup> Checklists provide methodological procedural and consultative guidance to people who wish to propose place names.

<sup>2</sup> Australian states and territories reference Permanent Committee for Place Names guidelines with respect to the recommendation to retain Aboriginal language and toponymic expertise if necessary, including consulting the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, to assist with orthography and other language issues. However, this matter is largely irrelevant in jurisdictions that have done little if any dual naming to-date (e.g., Queensland).

<sup>3</sup> Queensland does not have a geographical names or nomenclature board per se; place naming is managed by “Queensland Place Names,” an administrative unit of the Department of Environment, Land and Water.

<sup>4</sup> South Australia’s naming authority falls under the mandate of the Surveyor-General.

<sup>5</sup> However, Ireland’s *Official Languages Act 2003*, gives a responsible minister the authority to issue “placenames orders.”

**Most jurisdictions:**

- have place-naming policies and practices related to Indigenous people or speakers of minority languages
- require some type of consultation with Indigenous/minority language groups with respect to place-naming decisions, although consultation protocols related to the general public may also be applied to minority groups;
- insist that Indigenous place names be based on Roman orthography. South Australia, however, is open to considering alternative orthographies such as syllabics should they be adopted for developing Aboriginal writing systems;
- support dual naming in some form. However, New Zealand and Australia's Northern Territory use a composite naming approach whereby a single name comprises two parts, each in a different language, joined by a solidus (slash). This reconciles dual naming with the principle of univocity. New Zealand also uses "alternative names" which are official and gazetted, but these names do not need to be used simultaneously on maps or other official documents;
- maintain online toponymic databases and/or gazetteers to manage place names as research tools and to provide information to the general public, albeit in the majority language (e.g., English, Finnish).
- recommend or require the involvement of Indigenous/minority language experts and/or social scientists (e.g., Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Institute for the Languages of Finland, Māori Language Commission); and
- provide guidelines and/or other documents that explain their policies and facilitate the submission of place name proposals.

**Some jurisdictions:**

- have dedicated place name legislation or a geographical names or nomenclature board of some kind;
- have funded large-scale systematic research regarding Indigenous/minority language toponyms through their place-naming authorities. In some countries, significant, dedicated toponymic research, productive of place names data, has been conducted by social scientists with funding from academic/scholarly sources (e.g., South Australia, Wales). In Ireland, Finland, and Wales, government bodies mandated to protect minority languages have undertaken considerable toponymic research. In New Zealand, some focused toponymic research has been conducted in the context of special arrangements with the Māori, such as the Treaty claims-making process established by the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975. Focused place names surveys have been conducted by the South Australia place names office in collaboration with university-based researchers. In the absence of focused research, Indigenous/minority language documentation and officialization tends to be piecemeal;
- support the use of diacritics. For example, until recently, all Australian jurisdictions insisted on Roman orthography only, with no diacritics, but this policy is under review, and South Australia has started to use diacritics in Aboriginal orthographies;
- have confronted the challenge of cultural generics, where there is a lack of equivalency between the feature terms or concepts used in each language. Both the UK's Ordnance Survey and New Zealand's Geographic Board recognize the problem and do not attempt to find equivalency Indigenous/minority language generics into English-language categories. New Zealand has published a list of Māori generics with the view to promoting their use by members of the general public.

**Few jurisdictions:**

- have had to grapple with the challenge of topo-complexes. New Zealand provides the only example: a single Māori place name applied to three geographic features, each with a separate English-language toponym;

**No jurisdiction:**

- attempts to educate the public in the pronunciation of Indigenous or minority language place names through the creation of digital audio databases with web-based access.

**Looking Forward**

The Indigenous Geographical Names Working Group of the GNBC will review the results of this study and those of the previous Canadian study to identify best practices and determine how the GNBC can incorporate them into a national policy on Indigenous geographical names. This will further the commitment of Canada to the United Nations Declaration Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 13, which states that Indigenous Peoples have the right *“to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.”*

The results will also be used to support several other objectives of the GNBC including: maintaining a national database of authoritative geographical names, and expanding Canada’s national database to accurately record, store and disseminate Indigenous place names.

It is hoped that the results of this policy scan will be helpful to other countries in reviewing or developing policies regarding Indigenous and minority-language geographical names.