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Indigenous Geographical Names Environmental Scan

Submitted by Canada **

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Introduction – Geographical Names Board of Canada

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 responsibilities for their respective jurisdictions and mandates. 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.

The naming authorities of the GNBC work with Indigenous Nations, communities and agencies in Canada to restore traditional geographical names or to adopt culturally significant contemporary names reflecting the rich and vibrant cultures of the original inhabitants of the country. Each GNBC naming jurisdiction's approach is different, reflecting its particular geography, history, policies and circumstances. This long-term work to research, identify and adopt place names of Indigenous origins is still evolving as a means of representing the coexistence of diverse social fabrics and cultures in Canada.

Indigenous Geographical Names – Markers of resiliency

Geographical names provide spatial references, but also record and embed a wealth of cultural and historical information about the people who inhabit or settled in a place or region. Long before Canada became a country, Indigenous societies were bestowing names on significant places and areas on their traditional homeland and beyond. The First Peoples usually maintained kinship-like relationships with the land, waters, flora and biodiversity from which they depended for sustenance, and as a result, place names were thoughtful, respectful and purposeful. Indigenous place names continue to serve as valuable mnemonic devices recording and carrying important geographical, historical, ecological and cultural knowledge into the future.

Once numerous across the land, many Indigenous place names disappeared slowly but steadily and systematically from governmental and archival records as newcomers settled the land and made their home in the newly established country. More recently, Canadian society is becoming increasingly aware and mindful of how its presence, history and heritage has participated to the gradual erasure of Indigenous land nomenclature and their cultures, languages, knowledge systems, governance structures, and historical and cultural narratives.

National Indigenous Environmental Scan

In the fall of 2020, NRCan engaged an Indigenous-owned consulting firm to conduct, on behalf of the GNBC, a national Environmental Scan focusing on Indigenous toponymy. The initiative consisted of a thorough study of ongoing and/or recently completed place naming activities undertaken by Indigenous nations, communities, organizations and governments, as well as other organizations who are working in partnership with Indigenous peoples with respect to place names.

Indigenous traditional knowledge systems can take many forms and operate in many intersectional domains, however cultural and geographical - including toponymic - knowledge systems are alive and shared mostly through oral traditions. Such valuable information is customarily shared, or passed down through conversations with elders, knowledge holders, fluent speakers and stewards of the land. Therefore,

the sources for such geographical and cultural information are numerous, and their nature varies considerably from one region to another and from one community to another.

The toponymic activities investigated were current and ongoing, as well as finalized and conducted over the past decade. The research involved a Canada-wide investigation to develop a general inventory of the recorded and compiled toponymic activities, including the status, coordinating body, and participants in the activity. These activities included partnerships between Indigenous communities and post-secondary educational institutions and/or provincial and territorial governments.

Prior to the engagement phase, the consultant developed an interview-based research methodology involving face-to-face interviews (where possible), telephone or videoconferencing interviews, or email or text correspondence. In keeping with Canada's legal requirements, as well as with diplomatic protocols of engagement for the various Indigenous nations or communities, the interviewer observed the local protocols of engagement. The ongoing pandemic presented the consultant with challenges, especially regarding the ability to approach and engage with communities, agencies or expert organizations. However, they successfully mitigated the risks by increasing their efforts to connect virtually with community members.

A key component of the engagement with Indigenous communities was the development of Data-Sharing Consent Forms for the community leadership and for the knowledge holder(s). The consent forms gave the potential contributors the power to choose if they agree or disagree to participate in the research. Consent forms were developed in English and French to accommodate the linguistic landscape of Indigenous communities located across Canada. The consent form for the community leadership confirmed that the leaders of the Indigenous community consented to participation in the research project, and granted permission to record, preserve and use the research findings for a final report. The consent form for the knowledge holders confirmed that elders, knowledge holders and expert members of the community agreed to participate to the research project, and granted permission to interview them and record, preserve and use the research findings in a final report. The consent forms allowed the research findings to be openly shared by NRCan with members of the GNBC through a summary report.

The interview model was the chosen methodology for conducting the Environmental Scan, involving a questionnaire consisting of a series of culturally appropriate research questions to be asked of the informant that addressed the nature of the toponymic projects. Prior to the interview phase, the contractor developed a provisional contact list of Indigenous communities of interest that are or have been conducting toponymic surveys or activities over the past 10 years. The consultant is tasked with contacting the Indigenous communities to provide context and details about the objectives of this research endeavour and administer the interview questions. Community leaders, experts and members must be informed of the objectives and undertakings.

The interview questions may be divided into three different categories. The first focuses on the informant, their cultural background, community affiliation and their involvement with the toponymic activity. The second pertains to the toponymic project(s), the scope, the geographical area encompassed by the project, the research methodology, community and/or non-community participants, the motives behind the research project, and whether or not the project is shared and made accessible publicly. The third category of questions investigates the informant's knowledge of the process for geographical name submissions and officialization, as well as views and perspectives regarding potential collaboration with a naming authority in the future.

The relevant information gathered and compiled during these interviews will be used to create community profiles classified according to Indigenous jurisdictions and integrated into a standardized table cross-referencing the Canadian provincial and territorial naming authorities. In the analysis phase of the Environmental Scan, the following questions will be addressed based on detailed information collected:

- Which Indigenous nations are/were actively involved in compiling their cultural place names?
- What type of organizations/agencies/bodies are/were generally undertaking this toponymic work?
- What regions/provinces/territories of Canada have the most Indigenous place naming activities?
- In cases of partnership projects, who are the third party organizations that generally collaborate with Indigenous communities?
- Who were the Indigenous communities contacted?
- How many Indigenous communities consented/dissented to participate in this research project?
- If a community dissented, what was the reason provided for their decision?
- What are the recommendations regarding the next steps to be taken to advance this research, including feedback and suggestions for future areas of research based on the knowledge gaps observed?

Next Steps

The findings from this Environmental Scan research initiative will be used to support several objectives of the GNBC, including strengthening policy and research, maintaining a national database of authoritative geographical names, and expanding Canada's national database to accurately record, store and disseminate Indigenous place names.

A future undertaking of the GNBC is the update of the *Principles and Procedures for Geographical Naming in Canada*¹, with special consideration given to making the appropriate and necessary addition of a national Indigenous naming guideline. The ongoing Indigenous Environmental Scan will help to provide a snapshot of current and recent Indigenous naming activities in Canada at the grassroots level, inform the development of future policies, and help with the GNBC's continuous effort to foster dialogue and partnerships with Indigenous nations across Canada.

¹ Natural Resources Canada, The Geographical Names Board of Canada (2011), *Principles and Procedures for Geographical Naming*, Available at: <https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/earth-sciences/geography/geographical-names-board-canada/guiding-principles-geographical-naming/9176> (Accessed: 25 February, 2021)