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English

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Item 4(a) of the provisional agenda *

**Reports: Governments on the situation in their countries and on the
progress made in the standardization of geographical names.**

Report of Australia

Submitted by Australia**

Summary:

This report summarises the Australian arrangements for national standardisation of place names. It shares the vision and role of the Australia and New Zealand Working Group on Place Names (ANZWGPN); a cooperative of representatives from both nations and of which relevant Australian members operate in lieu of an official national level names authority. It discusses the working relationships between the bodies representing government, academic, public, and indigenous interests at the national level, then presents key developments that have had national focus since UNGEGN's 2nd Session in 2021.

* GEGN.2/2023/1

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Report of Australia

Background

Context

Before European colonisation there were hundreds of languages spoken on this continent and each of those languages had its own place naming system. As with many countries around the world colonisation involved, in part, naming distinct features of the landscape in a way that resulted in a new introduced system of place names which varied from the indigenous systems. For Australia, the names of the introduced system began with those generated by European explorers who charted parts of the Australian coastline. Upon settlement many place names were copied from places overseas, or were modelled from the naming system familiar to the new settlers (e.g. commemorative naming). On the other hand, many were also copied from the numerous indigenous systems and languages; some of these were existing place names in those languages (which may or may not have been applied to the same exact place or transcribed accurately), some were attempts to describe the place using indigenous language words or references to people, others were words that settlers found pleasant-sounding or attractive enough to use as toponyms.

Most of those first languages are no longer in daily use and there has been reliance on historical records and a very small number of remaining speakers to reveal the existence and meaning of many of the place names that once labelled the Australian landscape. Increasingly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are being supported to work with remaining speakers, or to revisit recordings or other documents to revive their languages or to create writing systems for them. Through this work, we are seeing a corresponding re-discovery of place names, and growing appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural influence in Australian place names.

How does Australia achieve national standardisation of place names?

Within Australia, the legislative head of power for place names is distributed across local, state, territory, and commonwealth governments. National coordination and standardisation are facilitated under a framework provide by the ANZWGPN, membership of which comprises representatives from Australian and New Zealand government naming authorities¹, as well as Australia's national mapping agency² and Australia's national placenames survey³.

Initially established as an informal committee of Australian experts in 1985, the ANZWGPN (under a previous name⁴) became a standing committee of Australia and New Zealand's Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping in 1993. The move helped formalise a relationship between place names and geospatial information within government agencies as well as expanding the scope of place naming discussions to include the national names authority of New Zealand. While the vision and role of the ANZWGPN is applicable to members from both countries, each produces its own set of national policies and principles, and this report focusses only on the challenges and programs of work specific to Australia.

¹ Australia's six states and two internal territories, the Australia Hydrographic Office, the Australian Antarctic Division, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, and the New Zealand Geographic Board.

² Geoscience Australia

³ Australian National Placenames Survey

⁴ Purpose, terms of reference, and membership have remained relatively stable, but the group's name has evolved over time. It has been titled the Committee on Geographical Names in Australia (CGNA) from 1985 until 1993, the Committee on Geographical Names in Australasia (also CGNA) from 1994 until 2016, the Permanent Committee on Place Names (PCPN) from 2017 until 2020, and the Australia and New Zealand Working Group on Place Names (ANZWGPN) from 2021.

The ANZWGPN has a vision of place names connecting people, information, and place through the past, present and into the future. The purpose of the ANZWGPN (and by inclusion the collective mission of Australian members of that group) is to;

- Provide a framework for standardised place naming practice.
- Provide a framework for delivery of comprehensive place names products
- Facilitate provision of expert advice to government and industry for effective decision making relating to place names
- Facilitate preservation of the heritage and cultural significance of place names.

ANZWGPN and Australia's sub-national naming authorities have long been supported by the Australian National Placenames Survey (ANPS), a national cultural research project initiated in 1970 within the academic sector. With staffing and financial resources focused on formal decision-making activities, government naming authorities have limited capacity to comprehensively research the history, origin and meaning of all current official placenames within their jurisdictional databases, still less document any historical names and unofficial alternatives. Further, the cultural aspects of placename study have never formed an area of systematic academic research in Australia. ANPS was established to remedy those gaps in Australian toponymy. Originally supported by universities and research grants, and integral in bringing together government agencies to form what is now the ANZWGPN, the ANPS project is today supported by a non-profit voluntary association, welcoming contributions from, and sharing information amongst, academics, community groups, public servants, and interested members of the public.

Notably, both groups have strong relationships with First Languages Australia (FLA), the national peak body representing a network of language centres and community programs across the country, and who are working to strengthen all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. FLA acts to represent the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island language custodians seeking public and official recognition of their traditional place names, and to address offensive or hurtful place names in current use.

Relationships between representatives of the three bodies therefore facilitate cooperation in matters of national place naming standardization: the various government agencies managing legislative frameworks and programs of work for decision making and data management; the ANPS sharing academic insight on linguistic and toponymic issues and supporting community and academic research of place name history, origin and meaning; FLA facilitating important conversations about indigenous language recognition, community-led governance protocols, and building understanding around matters such as data sovereignty, protection of indigenous cultural knowledge, and funding for language workers.

Key developments during the reporting period

Data and systems

As acknowledged by some of UNGEGN's recent conversations, linked open data is seen as an important technical development because it can be a vehicle for efficient and effective re-use of authoritative place names data. In 2021 it was reported that the Composite Gazetteer of Australia and the Australian place types catalogue have been published in linked data formats. Authoritative place names data has since gained recognition within the Australian linked data community for its value as a cross disciplinary vocabulary, and been a topic of discussion at research workshops in 2021 and 2022 (co-hosted by the International Science Council's Committee on Data, the DDI Alliance, Australian Data Research Commons, and the Australian Data Archive). These two events have been integral in bringing together interested individuals from across the research community and have led to the organisation of a special interest group to draft a road map for vocabularies and semantic resources in Australia.

National principles and guidelines

Mechanisms for acknowledgment of indigenous languages continues to be an ongoing discussion in Australian place naming. Early national principles encouraged consideration for indigenous place names, although out of respect for the variable legal, social, and technical influences across naming authorities they have stayed silent on the specific processes by which naming authorities should achieve that ideal. Jurisdictions each have their own legislative frameworks and developed policies that support and promote recognition of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, languages, and cultures. As time passes, we are learning from those various experiences and attempting greater specificity in national level naming principles, to provide greater guidance to naming authority staff, to facilitate consistent outcomes from jurisdictional practices, and to promote cohesion in the national message.

Australia's naming principles document is certainly not static: there is an annual discussion amongst users, and with the growing profile of place naming we are embarking on a longer review to ensure that principles are adequate to help guide improved standardisation. *Principles and Guidelines for Australian Place Naming* is undergoing final review and will be published [online](#) once approved.

Engagement

An Australian Place Names web page now provides a public landing page for information on, and access to, the national gazetteer, national principles, and links for Australian sub-national names authorities. It has been produced with support of the Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping, and the Australia and New Zealand Working Group on Place Names. <https://www.icsm.gov.au/what-we-do/place-names/australian-place-names>

Building relationships between place names and other intergovernmental committees has broadened and deepened appreciation for place names and the value of our national cooperative, particularly in relation to geospatial information. This has resulted in the inclusion of our work in the strategic plans of geospatial intergovernmental committees, funding and in-kind support for projects such as enhancement of the national gazetteer, and place name presentations and panel discussions included in Locate, Australia's annual geospatial industry conference. At both the national and sub-national level, efforts continue to integrate or link place name and spatial databases.

During the intersessional period, together with New Zealand, Australian naming authorities engaged with representatives from Google Maps. Key contact people were introduced, learnt from each other about challenges and approaches to managing authoritative place names, and several data inconsistencies have been addressed. A key learning for naming authorities was the availability of a portal specifically for authoritative data sources ([Maps Content Partners](#)).

Sub-national projects

As well as contributing to the initiatives already mentioned, sub-national names authorities have their own programs of work that contribute towards the national agenda and address more specific issues. Individual projects and work programs are numerous, although they can be summarised under two main themes.

- *Reviewing names and naming practices in relation to diversity and inclusion.* For example: engaging with stakeholders on their experiences, collaborating across names authorities, promoting indigenous cultures through place names, releasing strategies and policies to increase focus on specific agendas, reviewing committee and board arrangements, expanding guidelines related to names reflecting diverse cultural situations, and addressing community sensitivities associated with certain names.
- *Improvements to data management practices.* For example: enhancing information held within databases, improving access to that information, expanding mechanisms through which the public can submit names or information for consideration, integrating or embedding place names with other geospatial information, and partnering with

indigenous communities to establish protocols for the management of their place names information in public databases.

Conclusions

The cooperation of sub-national naming authorities through Australian members of the ANZWGPN continues to be a very important part of Australia's ability to deliver ongoing improvements to place names standardisation. The federation of data from numerous repositories remains a challenge, although the relationships between government departments, academic and community researchers, are helping to coordinate and direct efforts in similar directions.

In a world that is increasingly connected, the role of comprehensive gazetteers becomes increasingly critical. The growing realisation of that role and current investment in such work across numerous Australian spatial data authorities is beginning, although there will always be more that needs to be achieved; place names are ubiquitous and names authorities numerous. Facilitating access to adequate guidance for decision-makers, and to comprehensive and trusted information for users, is a complex and ongoing challenge, especially in a country so geographically, linguistically, and culturally diverse as Australia.

The federated approach to a national names authority relies not on a single head of power but on cooperative leadership through a network of people and projects that deliver benefit to an array of stakeholders. It is presumably more difficult than having a single nationally legislated body that can set rules to follow, but encourages the development of numerous relationships, links, and connections which are helping to evolve a cohesive, inclusive, and trusted governance model for Australian place naming.