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English

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Geographical Names**

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Reports: Divisions of the Group of Experts

Report of the USA-Canada Division

Submitted by USA-Canada Division**

Summary:

After a period of inactivity, the United States of America-Canada Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names resumed activities in early 2021. The Division, co-chaired by the United States and Canada, held a number of virtual meetings in the period 2021–2023 to introduce new participants and discuss topics of common interest. The full report contains an overview of the joint activities undertaken by the Division, including a virtual discussion forum attended by members of the Geographical Names Board of Canada and the United States Board on Geographic Names, and a summary of general discussions held by the Division, in particular concerning derogatory place names.

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Report of the USA-Canada Division

Background

The USA-Canada Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names is comprised of the national geographical naming authorities of each country. The purpose of the Division is to discuss topics of mutual interest and to share expertise related to geographical naming and standardization. The Division is co-chaired by the Executive Secretaries of the United States Board on Geographic Names (BGN) and the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC). A team from Natural Resources Canada, United States Geological Survey, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration coordinate Division activities.

The U.S. BGN is a Federal body comprised of representatives of Federal agencies. Sharing its responsibilities with the Secretary of the Interior, the BGN promulgates official geographic feature names with locative attributes as well as principles, policies, and procedures governing the use of domestic names, foreign names, Antarctic names, and undersea feature names.

The GNBC is the national coordinating body responsible for principles, procedures and guidelines for geographical naming in Canada. The Board 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.

Renewed Activities of the USA-Canada Division

Broad adoption of teleworking and virtual meeting technologies worldwide has led to the ability for international discussion between geographical naming boards and authorities, subject matter experts, and officials responsible for place naming activities. The USA-Canada Division has taken full advantage of this ability for dialogue, and since early 2021 has revitalized its activities. Regular meetings have been held between Division co-chairs and a small Canada-U.S. coordination team.

The Division provides a cordial working forum to discuss topics of common interest, and to exchange information on practices related to geographical naming. Discussions to date have focussed on sharing of information regarding Indigenous geographical names and approaches to derogatory geographical names by the naming boards in each country. Significantly, two virtual discussion forums were organized by the Division, with broad participation from the memberships of the U.S. BGN and GNBC.

2022 Virtual Forum

An initial USA-Canada virtual forum was held in June 2022. The agenda was structured to provide forum participants with an introductory overview of the mandates and activities of the BGN and the GNBC. The respective Chairs of each Board provided an overview of the structure of each body. Representatives from each Board provided a review of national principles, policies and procedures guiding the geographical naming activities of each body. Other representatives provided an overview of processes for Indigenous or Tribal engagement in each country. Each Board provided an update on approaches to change derogatory place names, a topic of significant focus and activity by naming authorities in each country. The 3-hour forum included an active question-and-answer session, and was well attended by participants from both countries.

2023 Virtual Forum

Building on the success of the initial virtual forum, the USA-Canada Division organized a follow-up meeting between the GNBC and U.S. BGN in February 2023. The meeting focussed specifically on a sharing of approaches to derogatory geographical names in each country.

The meeting included opening remarks from senior officials from the United States Geological Survey and Natural Resources Canada highlighting the level of attention in both countries to the issue of racist and offensive geographical names, and the efforts to remove or change them. Presentations from the USA described a year-long effort to reconcile over 640 geographical names that contained a term derogatory to Indigenous people, as well as current efforts to identify derogatory names. Presentations from Canada outlined the efforts of the GNBC to develop best practices on addressing derogatory names, and case studies from two Canadian jurisdictions who have recently removed or changed offensive geographical names.

Conclusion

Although the jurisdiction and processes for place naming differ between the United States and Canada, there is a great opportunity for knowledge sharing between the naming authorities for each country. The USA-Canada Division intends to have periodic meetings to maintain a regular dialogue and identify other opportunities for discussion on matters of mutual interest or collaboration. Further virtual forums involving members of the U.S. BGN and GNBC may include discussions on sharing of best practices for engagement with Indigenous groups, cross-border feature names, or undersea feature naming.