

13 March 2023

English

**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names**

2023 session

New York, 1 – 5 May 2023

Item 12 of the provisional agenda *

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

Addressing derogatory geographical names in Canada

Submitted by Canada **

Summary:

The Geographical Names Board of Canada is addressing derogatory, discriminatory and harmful geographical names that appear in the official names data.

A working group of the Board has been established to engage in discussions on best practices and ongoing efforts in addressing, rescinding and replacing derogatory names.

Several naming jurisdictions in Canada have taken proactive action to rescind derogatory names. Certain offensive names have been removed from national base maps, and content warnings have been applied to the national names database and downloadable data.

The paper provides an outline of some of the actions taken over the past two years by the Board and its federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities to respond to the issue of derogatory names, and racist place names in particular.

* GEGN.2/2023/1

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Addressing Derogatory Geographical Names in Canada

Context

The Geographical Names Board of Canada (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.

The GNBC is supported by a Secretariat provided by Natural Resources Canada (NRCan), a department of the Government of Canada. NRCan provides infrastructure and support for the Canadian Geographical Names Database, the national database of authoritative geographical names and a key component of Canada's spatial data infrastructure.

Origins of the issue

There is increasing awareness that some official names of geographical features such as mountains, lakes and islands in Canada are racist, misogynistic and offensive. Many of these names are the result of the colonial practices of settlers who assigned names to features while exploring and mapping the vast and varied landscape. These place names may have originally been established at a time in history when certain terminology was considered acceptable. As language and societal values change, so too does the understanding of what is considered harmful and discriminatory.

The shared values of Canadians have evolved — and will continue to do so — and the language and terms used to describe the landscape must also evolve. Names of geographical features and community names are not static and may change through the processes and procedures maintained by Canada's naming authorities.

In response to increasing public awareness, several jurisdictions in Canada have taken action to remove offensive place names. Further work remains to be done to review and rescind derogatory names and rename geographical features with appropriate nomenclature. Derogatory terminology evolves with enhanced understandings of historical intention and actions. While efforts decades ago addressed many derogatory geographical names, other names that are now considered discriminatory were overlooked.

Reviewing problematic place names

The GNBC has long-established national principles and guidelines for geographical naming, with the intention of prevent derogatory or offensive names from being approved. However, historical names adopted before modern principles were established remain official, with no rapid method to remove and replace them.

In order to assess the scope of the issue of derogatory names, NRCan undertook a search of the national geographical names database using queries of known offensive terms and keywords. The database search identified potentially derogatory names in every jurisdiction in Canada. These identified geographical names were shared with the respective provincial and territorial naming authorities for investigation.

Content Advisory

In a proactive measure, NRCan implemented a content warning on its public website. A notice advising users that the database contains historical terminology that is considered racist, offensive and derogatory was added to all web pages and search tools where users could encounter derogatory geographical names.



Figure 1 – Content Advisory from Natural Resources Canada website

NRCan is also responsible for the national base map of Canada. NRCan took a targeted approach to remove instances place names with the word “*Sq****” (a term derogatory to Indigenous women), and the word “*Ne****” (a term derogatory to the Black community) from maps available online. While these actions do not change the official status or availability of these particular names, they will no longer be promoted on official federal maps.

Working group established

In the spring of 2022, NRCan and the GNBC began reflecting on the continued existence and usage of official geographical names that perpetuate derogatory language. The GNBC established a working group for federal, provincial and territorial members to discuss and share approaches to derogatory names, and to develop recommendations for interim measures. The working group continues to meet monthly to discuss developments and best practices.

Current status

Recent changes to derogatory names that have occurred in Canada include the removal of two offensive names in Yukon (February 2022), three names in British Columbia (February 2023), and one name in Nova Scotia (March 2023). The derogatory “*Sq****” names in Yukon were replaced with traditional Indigenous names in the Southern Tutchone language. Actions in British Columbia and Nova Scotia have removed the term “*Ne****” from four locations.

Ongoing discussions by the GNBC have indicated that resolution of derogatory names can be complex. There is often no consensus on the definition of “derogatory” within cultural communities with respect to place names, and there are practical impacts of rescinding or removing derogatory names without a suitable replacement name, as place names are used for critical activities such as emergency response and maritime navigation.

Conclusion

Derogatory geographical names exist on the Canadian landscape, including instances of names that are racist and offensive to particular groups or members of society. Geographical Names Board of Canada members are actively discussing best practices remove hateful, racist and offensive terminology from official geographical names. Changing these names better reflects Canadian values and increases inclusion across the Canadian landscape.

Related Links

[Guiding principles for geographical naming \(canada.ca\)](#)

[Search the Canadian Geographical Names Database \(CGNDB\) \(nrcan.gc.ca\)](#)

Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to:

- (1) Express its views on the report and discuss the issues raised in support of strengthening the operations and work of the GNBC.
- (2) Provide input and guidance on actions taken when addressing derogatory place names.
- (3) Welcome and invite National Names Authorities to provide comment on further work that could be done to improve the Member State's response.