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English

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

2023 session

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Item 4a 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 Canada

Submitted by Canada **

Summary:

Since the 2021 session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, the Geographical Names Board of Canada, Canada's national coordinating body for place naming authorities, has made progress toward achieving the goals set out in its 2020–2025 strategic plan. The 125th annual general meeting of the Names Board in 2022 was held in person for the first time since the beginning of the global coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

The strategic plan includes several priorities: review role; mandate and governance; enhance internal and external communication and collaboration; and improve database content and management. Recognizing that 2023 represents the halfway point of the plan, the focus has been largely on enhancing communications and improving the national database, as well as addressing emerging priorities, such as derogatory place names.

The communication and educational tools released in 2022 included an additional 125 names on the interactive map entitled “Stories from the land: Indigenous place names in Canada”; and a short video celebrating the 125th anniversary of the Names Board.

The United States of America-Canada Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names was revitalized with activities that included a virtual discussion forum on national principles, sharing processes on addressing derogatory place names and engagement with Indigenous governments and communities.

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Canada actively participates in the Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management and attended the sessions it held in 2021 and 2022.

National database work included tagging place names with Indigenous origins and updating language of origin fields to better reflect the presence and diversity of Indigenous place names in Canada. This work has resulted in the public release of a thematic dataset of Indigenous place names containing over 20,000 official place names, with more being added on an ongoing basis. A pilot project in partnership with the Innu Nation of Labrador to incorporate audio files into the national dataset was undertaken in 2022, which added the pronunciation of over 400 official names in the Innu-aimon language. Projects are under way to evaluate and modernize the national database system and its contents.

Report of Canada

Introduction

The Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) is established under a federal Order in Council as the national coordinating body responsible for principles, procedures and guidelines for geographical naming in Canada. The Board comprises members from federal, provincial and territorial government departments and agencies, each with specific responsibilities for their respective jurisdictions and mandates, and an appointed Chairperson and Indigenous Advisor. Working together as a multi-jurisdictional national body, GNBC members ensure that geographical names are consistently managed in Canada. The GNBC was initially established 1897 and celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2022.

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 Data Base (CGNDB), the national database of authoritative geographical names and a key component of Canada's spatial data infrastructure. NRCan consolidates geographical names data, spatial delineations of features, and naming decisions provided by the naming authorities of the GNBC in the CGNDB.

The GNBC accomplishes its mandate by developing guidelines and standards for the treatment of geographical names and toponymic terminology; coordinating geographical naming activities in Canada; promoting the use of official names; and representing Canada in international forums. The GNBC meets in plenary session once each calendar year in-person and semi-quarterly virtually, providing a national forum to exchange knowledge, discuss issues, and make decisions on toponymic matters. Smaller working groups and advisory committees composed of GNBC members address specific topics or areas of work and develop policies or initiatives to be considered and implemented by the Board.

Canada's Geographical Naming Authorities

Generally in Canada, the authority to officially name geographical features rests with the 13 provincial and territorial governments. Each province and territory has established procedures to investigate naming proposals for geographical features situated within its area of jurisdiction. Naming proposals involve extensive research by the jurisdictional authority and consultation with inhabitants of the region to confirm that proposed names are used and supported by the local community. The

naming jurisdictions in Canada have developed standardized national guidelines (*Principles and Procedures for Geographical Naming*), endorsed and adopted by the GNBC in 2011. Once names are approved by a responsible jurisdictional authority, they are recognized and endorsed as official decisions of the GNBC.

GNBC 2020-2025 Strategic Plan

The Strategic Plan describes the GNBC priorities in an accountable and transparent way for the period 2020-2025. Each strategic objective outlined in the plan is intended to strengthen the effectiveness of GNBC operations, refine policies and procedures, streamline the national database and encourage the use, exchange and promotion of authoritative geographical names. These objectives are implemented through several active working groups and an advisory committee.

The 2020-2025 GNBC Strategic Plan focusses on four key overarching objectives:

1. Review Role, Mandate and Governance
2. Enhance Internal Communication and Collaboration
3. Improve Database Content and Management
4. Enhance External Profile and Collaboration

One of the important opportunities pursued in the Strategic Plan is the continued adoption and promotion of Indigenous place names; this is a significant component of the Board's work, and is embedded in the four strategic priorities to be pursued over the 2020-2025 timeframe.

Now past the halfway point of the plan, the Board is reviewing the planned priority tasks in the context of impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and where adjustments in timelines are needed.

Enhance Internal and External Communications

In 2021, the GNBC released an update to its interactive map, [Stories from the Land: Indigenous Place Names in Canada](#), adding 125 more names and supplementary interpretive information. This map remains the most viewed of the three interactive maps the GNBC has published to date.

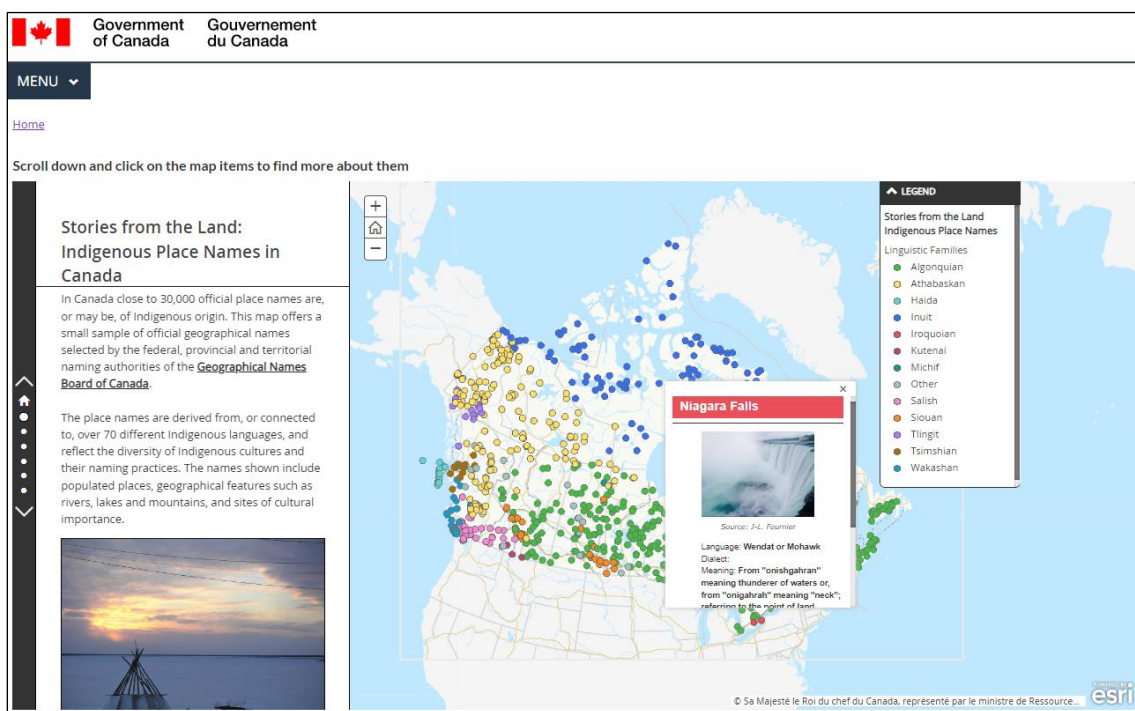


Figure 1: Online interactive map of Indigenous place names in Canada

As part of marking the 125th anniversary of the GNBC, a short three-minute video was created to highlight the history, general information and the Board’s work with Indigenous geographical naming. The video is hosted on the GNBC website and was shared broadly on social media channels.

Geographical names in Canada

Access the Canadian Geographical Names Database, find guidelines for proposing a geographical name, and learn about geographical terms and the origins of Canadian place names.

[The Geographical Names Board of Canada celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2022! Learn more!](#)





GNBC
Geographical
Names Board
of Canada



CTC
Commission de
toponymie du
Canada



Learn more about the Geographical Names Board of Canada by watching our new video about official geographical names across Canada, with a particular focus on Indigenous place names.

Figure 2 – Web page marking the 125th anniversary of the GNBC

The GNBC has published draft [Best Practices for Indigenous Place Naming](#) intended to support naming authorities when naming or renaming geographical features. They provide a set of core principles to consider when addressing geographical names with origins in Indigenous languages, or determining if such names exist for a particular geographical feature or place. The document is considered a draft as members of the GNBC are seeking feedback from Indigenous partners, advisory bodies and organizations on this draft document. [For more detailed information, see Canada’s paper entitled “Canada’s Draft Best Practices for Indigenous Geographical Names” under agenda item 12.]

Improve Database Content and Management

Ongoing improvement of the maintenance and management of the national geographical names database has been identified as a priority of the GNBC, to ensure Canada has a consistent and authoritative collection of official place names. Long-planned work on systems that support the database is underway to upgrade two Application Programming Interfaces (APIs). These APIs are used to update the database with new or changed place names, and to query the database through public search tools. Systems review and planning to establish priorities for further modernization continues.

Since 2021, there has been substantial progress in identifying and tagging names in the national geographical names database that have origins in Indigenous cultures and languages. This has resulted in the publication of a new thematic dataset of Indigenous geographical names containing over 20,000 records and growing, through continuing research, identification and naming approvals by Canada’s naming authorities.

A pilot project in partnership with the Innu Nation of Newfoundland and Labrador has resulted in the successful addition of audio files into the official name records of over 400 Innu-aimon language place names. The audio files contain correct pronunciation of the place names, spoken by Innu-aimon language speakers. Hearing the proper pronunciations helps all non-speakers of the language to learn the place names and use them.

[For more detailed information, see Canada’s paper titled “*Dissemination and Promotion of Indigenous Place Names*” under agenda item 10.]

Enhance External Profile and Collaboration

UN-GGIM

Canada is an active participant at the United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management. Representatives on each committee are from the same Government of Canada department and work together closely to coordinate activities. Canada supports the idea of a collaborative project between UNGEN and UN-GGIM, and will participate by providing information and support as requested.

UNGEEN USA-Canada Division

After several dormant years, the USA-Canada Division of UNGEEN was re-engaged in 2022. The two countries’ national naming authorities have since met twice in virtual discussion forums to share expertise and best practices on mutual topics of interest. [For more detailed information, see the report titled “*USA-Canada Division*” under agenda item 4(b).]

Addressing Derogatory Geographical Names

In recognition that there are racist, offensive and discriminatory place names in the current official place names of Canada, addressing derogatory names has become a priority for the GNBC. A content warning has been added to the public search tools for the national database, and some labels have been removed from Canada’s base map. A Working Group dedicated to sharing processes and discussing best practices was started in 2021. [For more detailed information see Canada’s paper titled “*Addressing Derogatory Names in Canada*” under agenda item 12.]

Summary

A diverse group of stakeholders, ranging from government organizations and emergency services, to the mapping and geomatics industry and the broader Canadian public rely on the work accomplished by the GNBC as Canada’s national coordinating body for place names. For over 125 years, the members of the GNBC have worked to research, standardize, approve, record and promote the official geographical names of Canada. The activities of the GNBC ensure that Canadians can continue to rely on accurate and authoritative geographical names as an important aspect of culture and heritage, and as a fundamental component of Canada’s spatial data infrastructure.

Related links

Stories from the Land: Indigenous Place Names in Canada: [Stories from the Land: Indigenous Place Names in Canada](#)

GNBC 125th Anniversary: [The Geographical Names Board of Canada Celebrates 125 Years](#)