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**United Nations Group of Experts on**

**Geographical Names**

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Item 8 (a) of the provisional agenda\*

**Cultural, heritage and language recognition: Geographical names  
as culture, heritage and identity**

**Guidelines for geographical names as cultural heritage: A  
framework for experts and researchers on geographical  
names**

Submitted by the Republic of Korea\*\*

**Summary**

Geographical names are vital carriers of historical narratives, cultural identities, and linguistic diversity. Recognizing their significance as intangible cultural heritage, naming authorities at both central and local levels, along with researchers in the Republic of Korea, have endeavored to integrate cultural heritage elements into the standardization, management, and study of geographical names. To support and enhance this focus, research was conducted in 2024, sponsored by the National Geographic Information Institute (NGII) of the Republic of Korea. This research aimed to develop a draft of guidelines for geographical names as cultural heritage, intended as a reference for experts and researchers on geographical names.

This report outlines the rationale behind creating these guidelines, their intended purpose, the development process, and the structural framework, including criteria for evaluating geographical names as cultural heritage. It also discusses potential applications in geographical naming practices. The guidelines prioritize the integration of cultural heritage values into the names standardization process and highlight best practices to ensure consistency and cultural sensitivity in naming decisions.

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\*\* Prepared by Jihwan Yoon, Sungjae Choo, and Young-Hoon Kim (Republic of Korea).

## **Guidelines for geographical names as cultural heritage: A framework for experts and researchers on geographical names**

### **Background**

The preservation of geographical names as cultural heritage has been a central focus of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) since the Sixth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) in 1992. Initially, the discussions concentrated on safeguarding the names of Indigenous groups, minority populations, and linguistic communities. Over the years, this concept has evolved to encompass criteria for preserving historical names, recognizing their resilience, and assessing their cultural and social significance.

In 2024, the National Geographic Information Institute (NGII) of the Republic of Korea sponsored research aimed at developing a set of guidelines to emphasize the protection of geographical names as cultural heritage. This initiative was launched to tackle the growing challenges in geographical name standardization, such as the erosion of heritage due to urbanization, political shifts, and modernization. The guidelines are designed to offer a flexible and systematic approach for incorporating cultural heritage considerations into official geographical naming policies and academic research. They are grounded in previous UNGEGN (formerly UNCSGN) resolutions, notably Resolution X/3 (2012), which established criteria for recognizing geographical names as cultural heritage based on historical documentation, resilience, rarity, evidential capacity, emotional appeal, and imaginative potential.

### **Purpose**

The guidelines are intended to serve as a comprehensive reference for government officials, central and local naming authorities, and researchers involved with geographical names. The primary objectives are:

- To ensure the preservation of historically and culturally significant geographical names;
- To provide a structured framework for evaluating geographical names within the cultural heritage context;
- To promote best practices for integrating cultural and linguistic heritage into standardization processes;
- To facilitate cooperation between national and international institutions involved in geographical naming and cultural heritage management; and
- To assist policymakers in balancing the demands of modernization with the imperative of heritage preservation.

### **Process**

The development of the guidelines for geographical names as cultural heritage involved the following steps:

- The six criteria recommended by Resolution X/3, adopted at the 10th UNCSGN in 2012 for selecting geographical names as cultural heritage, were reviewed and adapted to fit the context of Korean geographical names;
- Recommendations established by various countries, including the United States, Canada, and France, were referenced to ensure the preservation and continuity of geographical names

as cultural heritage;

- Consideration was given to issues related to cultural sensitivity and value judgments in the selection of geographical names as cultural heritage, including the groups and scales sharing names, conflicts over multiple names for a single feature, the preservation of names conflicting with universal human values, the impact of names on place branding, and the inherent brand value of the names themselves; and
- Proposals were made for establishing and archiving geographical names as cultural heritage, which included adjustments necessary for regional consolidation and integration, preservation of names in regional dialects, and the cultural heritage value to be assessed in vernacular names.

## Structure

The guidelines are structured into five sections:

1. Concept of geographical names and the need for standardization
  - 1.1. What are geographical names?
  - 1.2. Definition and scope of geographical names
  - 1.3. Significance and value of geographical names
  - 1.4. The need for and importance of standardizing geographical names
2. Concept of cultural heritage and its connection to geographical names
  - 2.1. Definition of cultural heritage
  - 2.2. UNESCO's perspective on cultural heritage
  - 2.3. Development of discussions on geographical names as cultural heritage
3. Role of geographical names as cultural heritage
  - 3.1. Interaction with space
  - 3.2. Reflection of human values
  - 3.3. Representation of group identity
  - 3.4. Potential for historical illustration
  - 3.5. Synthesis
4. Criteria and scope for evaluating geographical names as cultural heritage
  - 4.1. Historical significance
  - 4.2. Common usage
  - 4.3. Socio-cultural impact and effectiveness
5. Geographical names as cultural heritage and standardization
  - 5.1. Application in the process of geographical name standardization
  - 5.2. Archiving strategies for geographical names as cultural heritage

## Criteria and Scope for Evaluating Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage

The evaluation of geographical names as cultural heritage is categorized into three main areas, further divided into seven specific criteria. Each criterion is illustrated with two examples of Korean geographical names to provide context and explanation.

### A. Historical Significance

#### 1. Verifiability by records

- The historical significance of a geographical name must be verifiable through records. Names that exist solely through oral tradition may be limited in scope or shared only among specific groups. Even for names passed down orally, it is crucial to thoroughly verify the existence of records if they are used repetitively and extensively.

**2. Continuity of name usage**

- Geographical names from the past may be used in various ways, even if not officially documented, demonstrating their historical continuity. It is essential to identify if names are used informally within communities, in events or facility names, and consider archiving these instances.

**B. Common Usage****3. Resilience of name usage**

- Geographical names that have been consistently used over time can be recognized for their cultural value. Names that have experienced a decline in use or have been excluded from official lists, yet have regained frequency through persistent use in the community, should be acknowledged as cultural heritage.

**4. Evidential capacity of names**

- As cultural heritage, geographical names should effectively reflect the culture of specific groups or the characteristics of places. This can be assessed through the name's ability to represent historical facts, reflect group and place identity, and its use in festivals or product promotions.

**C. Socio-Cultural Impact and Effectiveness****5. Reflection of local identity and cultural uniqueness**

- Geographical names should represent the unique identity and culture of a region. Although challenging to quantify, this can be agreed upon through various discussions within the community. The rarity of a naming phenomenon is linked to cultural heritage criteria that emphasize group identity.

**6. Generation of diverse place images**

- Geographical names should evoke a range of regional, group, and cultural images through imagination. This signifies the role of names as a medium that conjures the image and identity of a region. As cultural heritage, names should reflect the organic connection between region, group, space, and nature.

**7. Appeal to belonging for local communities**

- Through compelling symbolism, geographical names should foster a sense of belonging to a specific region and community. Discussions should be based on the frequency with which names are mentioned officially and unofficially in the community and the resulting sense of belonging among residents.

**Prioritizing Geographical Names with Cultural Heritage Value in the Standardization Process**

The current *Manual for the Standardization of Geographical Names* (3rd Edition, 2018) declares that the foremost criteria for selecting names in the standardization process are (1) names currently in use locally, and (2) names reflecting the identity, historical significance, cultural heritage, and meaning of the place. According to these criteria, geographical names that meet the standards outlined in the previous section are already prioritized in the principles of name standardization.

Methods for prioritizing names with cultural heritage value in the standardization process can be established as follows:

- **Proposal stage for new names:** Local governments, individuals, or communities proposing new names should use the criteria outlined in the previous section to justify the legitimacy of the name.

- **Review stage for new names:** Higher-level local governments or the Korea National Committee on Geographical Names, as the final reviewing authority, should assess whether the proposed names meet the criteria outlined in the previous section. In cases where multiple names are proposed, priority should be given to those that align with these criteria.
- **For proposals to change existing names:** It is necessary to evaluate whether the newly proposed names meet the criteria outlined in the previous section and to assess any potential loss of cultural heritage value due to the name change.
- **Standardizing name proposal documentation:** To facilitate these evaluations, it is advisable to consider including the criteria from the previous section in a standardized format within the name proposal documentation.

## Conclusion

These guidelines recognize geographical names as an essential part of cultural heritage and provide a robust framework for integrating historical and cultural values into geographical naming practices. Adopting and applying these guidelines will contribute to a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to place name standardization, ensuring the preservation of historical identities while accommodating contemporary naming needs.

## Points for discussion:

The group of experts is invited to:

- (a) Take note of the report and the guidelines outlined herein for geographical names as cultural heritage, and provide feedback to refine and enhance the effectiveness of these guidelines;
- (b) Consider the significance of the guidelines on geographical names as cultural heritage and their potential application in geographical naming policies worldwide; and
- (c) Discuss strategies for enhancing international cooperation in preserving geographical names with cultural heritage value, including best practices and policy recommendations.