

NATIONAL AGENCIES, MODELS, AND PROCEDURES

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1. Communicating with geographical names

Every day we use names for features and places around us to describe our surroundings and to communicate to others all aspects of life – our ideas, our work, our social events, in fact the whole range of events of life. Perhaps these names are used in speech, perhaps in written form ... or, of course, today in combined forms of multimedia communications. Common understanding of names of places and geographical features are vital to effective communication. This means not only that the user has some framework of reference, but also that the receiver of the communication understands the system used.

In talk between a few individuals, particularly at a local level, identification of features may be very informal: we are going to “the lake”, “the shop”, “the big cliff”, “the wide bend”, “Tom’s back field”, etc. But the wider the audience, and the more formal the use, the greater the need for some sort of more rigid framework of geographical names references. When it comes to written documents, we can see from looking at historical records, how confusing the application of names has been and still can be. This is particularly evident when we consult maps. Perhaps different languages have been used, perhaps different names even in the same language have been used, or spellings have changed, or similar (or the same) names have been applied to different features. Compiled over a period of time, or by different people, names on maps can provide a significant challenge to those faced with their interpretation.

2. The need for geographical names standardization

2.1 *Early experience in Canada*

During the 1880s in Canada, exploration and settlement of the west led to considerable mapping by surveyors, geographers and geologists. The efforts of nearly all were directed towards accuracy of representation and consistent use of geographical names to label the features on their plans and charts. The expectations – both then and now – are that maps put out by any level of government should show consistency of spelling and application. For years those surveying the lands of western Canada had recognized the need for a single authority to which questions of geographical nomenclature and orthography

could be referred for decision. In this way many errors and inconsistencies in the use of geographical names on maps could be avoided. In 1888, considerable discussion took place about the names of features being recorded in the Canadian part of the Yukon River basin by a Lieut. Schwatka who was applying new names to features which were already named by gold miners, and misapplying names that were already long in use by the indigenous (Athapaskan) people of the area. He was recording “his” names for publication on a United States Coast Survey map of Alaska and adjacent areas! Many years of effort were needed to have the Canadian government establish a board to be the focal point for questions on Canadian names, and to make decisions on spellings and applications. Finally in 1897, an order of the Privy Council established the first Canadian board to protect and further Canadian interests.

This example, over a century ago, points out several things:

- (1) The need for an authority to take decisions on geographical names and so eliminate confusion and ambiguity in spelling and application of names;
- (2) Information, as consistent as possible, is required by users – someone else may take action if an appropriate authority does not exist. (In Canada’s case in the late 1800s, the United States was putting names on Canadian features to use on their maps and charts of North America.)
- (3) A technical body should be maintaining reference lists of geographical names, dealing with the technical problems that arise, and distributing the standardized (“authorized”, “official” or “approved”) names information.

2.2 *What is standardization?*

If geographical names are to serve as useful references, the relationship between the name and the place it designates and the message it conveys must be clear and understandable for all levels of use – local to international. “Place names must function as a communication code which guarantees a fixed relationship between the names and the places. It is, therefore, important that the use of place names be as coherent as possible, be subject to standardization, both in the choice of names and their

written form, and in the relationship between names and the places they designate.” (Dorion 1992) In short, place names must be “standardized”.

According to the United Nations *Glossary of Terms* .. (2002), “standardization” means rendering a geographical name in accordance with a set of standards or norms established by an appropriate authority.

Geographical names continue to play a significant role in communication, and the names established nationally are the most reliable to be used around the world. So, in reality, national standardization forms the basis for international standardization.

In theory a one-to-one relationship between a place and a name would be ideal. This is referred to as “univocity”. Each place or feature would be associated with one name, and a name would only designate one place/feature. In reality, such a theoretical objective is unattainable! The number of features around the globe is beyond imagination and the absence of repetition of names, even in a single language, would be impossible. In addition, the different perceptions of a given place have in many cases generated multiple names (both synchronic and diachronic) to designate the same place. Standardizing names includes the choice between different names in use to simplify the communication process.

2.3 Some benefits of geographical names standardization

Standardization of written forms of geographical names is not just an academic exercise, but has tangible practical benefits of social and economic advantage. Individuals can correctly identify reference points, be it in laws, regulations, legal notices or official documents; in educational materials; or in tourist literature. Standard written forms and applications of geographical names are important to government administrators, to industry and commerce, to education and science. A clear, unambiguous geographical reference framework to which other information can effectively be linked is invaluable in today’s GIS world; to search and rescue agencies; for postal and transportation services, etc.

In addition to the many technical benefits of such a programme, there are direct benefits in a cultural sense, in recording and preserving an important aspect of a country’s heritage. Much cultural and historical significance is held within the toponymic web of a region or a country. Often such names have been for generations a part of oral tradition, but never recorded.

When asked to justify a national geographical names programme, it is not always easy to show the tangible benefits in financial terms. Clearly, it is very difficult to compete with clean water, health, basic road infrastructure programmes, etc. However, on closer examination it is often found that considerable money and time are already being expended on names issues, but are absorbed by different existing programme areas, for example, cartographic, transport, census and legal departments. It may be that these diverse areas are overlapping in their efforts, each collecting and selecting names – with little or no coordination and often with conflicting results. Duplication of work and parallel activities in different departments that need precise toponymic information likely cost more than a small nucleus of individuals dedicated to the coordination of geographical names work. Consolidation of national geographical names functions will provide more consistent information in government documents and make standardized names available to a larger public – so greater benefits are reaped at less overall cost (Kerfoot, 1992).

In today’s web environment, with data proliferating on different web sites, the availability of authoritative standardized data is of ever greater significance. This provides significant impetus, and also challenges, to the work of names authorities.

3. Approaches to standardization

3.1 Some support from the United Nations

In the 1960s, the United Nations set up a mechanism for the establishment of the United Nations Group of Experts (UNGEGN) and the UN Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names. One of the first resolutions emphasized the need for all UN member states to have a national names authority. Resolution 4 of the First Conference (1967) is often thought of as the backbone of work that has subsequently taken place. It contained recommendations on:

- A. National names authorities
- B. Collection of geographical names
- C. Principles of office treatment of geographical names
- D. Multilingual areas
- E. National gazetteers

Part A (see Annex) recommends that each country should have a national geographical names authority, constituted with clear authority and continuing status, responsible

for its actions to government and making full use of expert advice from such individuals as surveyors, cartographers, geographers, linguists, etc. Those countries not yet exercising their right to standardize their geographical names on a national basis were encouraged to do this and to keep the UN Secretariat informed of such activities.

Support for national standardization programmes is included in various subsequent resolutions of the Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names (e.g. Resolution 15 of the Fifth Conference). The premise for international standardization activities and processes are consistently based on the concept of national standardization.

Today, more than ever, with the development of common spatial data infrastructures in different countries, a single national set of standardized geographical names becomes a very significant framework layer of geo-referenced data. The significance of such a geographical names data set in this context has been underlined at recent UN regional cartographic conferences (Asia and the Pacific 2000, the Americas 2001).

3.2 *Methods of achieving standardization*

Various options exist to achieve standardization. The relevance and viability of each depends largely on the nature of the country – its size, administrative structure, cultural/linguistic areas, politics, natural/administrative regions, available resources, and so on. It is desirable that the structure and operation of a national toponymic authority be consistent with the environment in which it exists.

Here are some possible models:

1. Centralized names “board” (commission, committee, council, authority, etc.)
 - A national names authority may be established under the umbrella of a particular government department, but responsibility is national in scope and “comprehensive” in types of geographical features being named.
 - Under a centralized structure, decision-making based on (for example) feature types or language areas, could be hierarchical in nature, with committees and subcommittees dealing with the different aspects of naming.
2. De-centralized names “board”
 - A central coordinating authority, but with regional authorities that are partly or completely auto-

nous in decision-making with regard to toponyms. This system could be flat or hierarchical. In the latter case, regional boards would feed into a national system. The central national focus may be developed before devolution of authority or created later to coordinate national standards for diverse regional authorities.

- Authority split on the basis of types of features being named (e.g. transport routes; conservation areas; municipal areas, etc.) or on the basis of language areas.
3. No “board”
 - Authority may be vested in an existing government department ... sometimes by default, the national mapping/charting agencies “look after” names; this could also be a university holding this function.

In reality, a standardizing process may be developed through a combination of these possibilities. Clearly, however, the resolutions of the UN conferences favour the establishment of a national authority (or authorities), rather than a mapping agency being in charge of names without any board or committee process being followed.

Although there is not one board formula that fits all situations, the more decentralized the process, the more difficult it will likely be to achieve consistency in approach, unless rigorous standards are in place for the various groups to follow. On the other hand, decentralization may provide better contact with the local use of names and keep the standardized toponymy rooted in reality.

4. **Names boards, commissions, committees, councils and authorities**

4.1 *Legal aspects*

The establishment of a toponymic authority is usually the result of a law, act, order in council, or similar enactment of the government. This document should clearly lay out the terms of reference, mandate, responsibilities, constitution, etc. of the board, and who is responsible for its organization and financing, its Chair and Secretariat. Legal recognition provides the appropriate status and authority to the structure and decision-making process. (Note, however, that this is not the same as the actual names decisions being legally binding ... a situation that would require other legislation and has been achieved in some countries.) Over the years it is important that the document establishing the board is reviewed, as changes to government structures, changes in approach, methods and responsibilities may become obsolete. Keeping this

document up to date helps to re-iterate the significance and relevance of the continuing functions of the board.

A board (commission, committee, council, authority, etc.) may have ultimate decision-making powers or, as is true in various countries, may be advisory to the prime minister, a government minister or a department. In either case, the board essentially takes pressure off a minister's office, and is expected to make independent decisions on what may be viewed as political issues.

4.2 *Who is on the names board?*

Of course, there are no set rules to follow! But a few general guidelines may help.

Assuming that one government department is taking the lead for the board (for example, the mapping department), representation should be sought from other departments who are either producers or users of geographical names data: defence, hydrographical charting, transport, post offices, parks, forestry, translation. A national board may well also include regional representation. It is important for the continued and inevitable competition for human and budgetary resources that a board report as high up the government hierarchy, as is practical and possible.

To maintain the public acceptance of the decision-making process, non-government participants can be included on the board. In some cases individuals might be selected for their own expertise (e.g. local history, language or archival knowledge), or they might represent particular public interest groups (e.g. language/ethnic groups, historical societies, educational interests). Appointments of members may be on a continuing basis, or particular terms of office may be set down.

The Chair may be from the responsible department, or may be rotational between government representatives. On the other hand, some boards are now looking to the private sector to fill this position, to make the Chair, as far as possible without political bias. It would be rare for the position of Chair to be a fulltime occupation.

There is no set number of members for a names board. Six seems to be a minimum requirement, and some boards have two or three times this number, as well as various *ex officio* members.

Assuming that some financial considerations are involved with holding meetings of the board and in undertaking its duties, cost may have an impact on the composition and size of membership. If the board mem-

bers are not government employees there may be some travel expenses involved in attending meetings, and possibly also a daily allowance as well.

Every board should have clear terms of reference drawn up, and it helps to have terms of office and duties of members clearly stated.

The frequency of board meetings varies considerably, generally from monthly to annually. Usually meetings would last a half or whole day, or perhaps longer if meetings are infrequent, participants must travel far, or other associated activities are included in the meetings. The amount of time available for support staff to process information for board decision, as well as the volume of outstanding material to be brought before the board, will be among the factors affecting the frequency of meetings.

4.3 *What must a names board do?*

The responsibilities and scope of names boards vary considerably. Usually a board will deal with names of physical features and/or populated places within its area of jurisdiction. Some boards also have authority over names of streets, constructed features (e.g. dams, bridges, buildings, docks, airports), farms, parks, cemeteries, and post offices.

Among the tasks facing a names board, are the following:

- (a) Developing policies and guidelines to provide rationale for the approval or rejection of names.
This may include policies on linguistic treatment and dealing with the status of possible variant names (particularly in multilingual areas). Subgroups may be tasked with particular issues, such as language policies, road signage, undersea feature naming, terminology, etc.
- (b) Making final decisions on names brought before the board, or providing recommendations to the department/minister for his/her signature. The board is thus the authority on standardization of geographical names within its jurisdiction. Decisions (or recommendations) should be made on whether or not names should be accepted, and if so, how they should be spelled and the extent of the feature to which they are applied. (Only in some cases do names boards take an active role in initiating the naming of features.)
- (c) Assuring that minutes of the board are made available, and that name decisions are recorded and disseminated as widely as possible ... to mapping agencies, government offices, translators, educators, the media, and the general public.

Some boards may also be involved with other activities, such as publications concerning names, brochures on the programme, providing a forum for committee or regional discussion, organizing workshops, and providing advice or direction to the Secretariat supporting the board.

4.4 *Support of a technical Secretariat*

A board cannot exist or perform its work without technical support in preparing the materials for consideration, maintaining records and distributing the name decisions. In most cases a board will have a centralized “secretariat”, ranging in size from one individual to a small team (the size often being smaller where additional staff are employed in other aspects of data base administration and maintenance, media contacts, etc.). It is also a possibility that different committees or working groups may be responsible for preparing the documents on different types of names (e.g. administrative, topographic features).

These are some of the basic functions of a secretariat:

1. Interaction with the members on the board, and provision of a link with other government departments and the private sector. Provision of liaison services with other names boards (e.g. municipal, regional, national) and if this is a national authority, provide contact with international toponymic bodies.
2. Organization of board meetings.
3. Timely preparation of all documentation for the board. Depending on the task at hand, this may involve preparing for authorization of a large number of names on one map sheet, or it could require detailed field investigation for local usage of just a few names.
4. Recording and maintenance of the minutes and decisions of board meetings.
5. If the board acts in an advisory capacity, sending board recommendations to the minister for signature.
6. Distribution of the name decisions when completed and signed. Sometimes there are requirements for names to be published (e.g. public announcement, gazette entry) before they are official.
7. Entering the name decisions into a database, on a web site, etc. (or ensuring this is completed, if the task is done in another area). Maintaining accurate, precise and unambiguous records, with the extent of features indicated, and with the support documentation in place.

8. Responding to enquiries from the public and the media regarding names information and the work of the board. Supplying written information, as necessary.
9. Developing forms and information sheets to provide to the public (or governments) for applications to name unnamed features, or to change existing names.
10. Ensuring that documentation is put in place and processed for appointments to the board, changes to acts, orders in council, or other organizational documents pertaining to the board.
11. Taking responsibility for the budget – board members’ travel to meetings, perhaps costs involved with translation, fieldwork, surveys, publications, postage, etc.
12. Providing leadership in activities associated with the board ... workshops, conferences, gazetteer production, etc.
13. If this is a national board, then the secretariat should keep aware of international toponymic activities, and wherever possible serve as a national representative for the United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical names, and as an expert on the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

4.5 *Policies and principles of a Board*

The cultural, historical and linguistic traditions of a country will, of course, influence the policies, principles and guidelines developed by a board. There is no one set of rules that fits all purposes.

Topics that might need to be addressed could include the following:

1. The importance of names in current and longstanding local usage. (How long used? By how many people?) Also names in current common usage (beyond the immediate area).
2. Language treatment in the various official/national/regional/other languages in the country – in relation to standards for the written form of a name (spelling, case, diacritics, word breaks, capitalization, etc.). Names from unwritten languages may also need to be addressed.
3. How to deal with multiple names. The principle of univocity may be an ideal, but may not be applicable in all cases. If more than one name is to be recognized, the equality of the names, or the particular cir-

cumstances when certain categories of names are to be used should be clearly specified. (The understanding of how to use or select from multiple toponyms may be difficult for those within the country, but it is even more difficult for those who are from outside the country, and perhaps from a different language group. Clear guidelines are very necessary.)

4. Avoiding duplication of names for places and features in close proximity. (This can be confusing to emergency services, delivery services, etc.)
5. Avoiding variations in spelling where a name is applied to several features close together.
6. Avoiding names that are derogatory or pejorative to any group of people.
7. Use of generic terminology that is appropriate to the feature.
8. If various parts of a named feature are to have their own names, thought should be given to avoiding the use of the same generic term for the parts as for the whole (e.g. peaks or summits are suitable on a mountain; coves and inlets can be sub-units of a bay).
9. Acceptance of names for legally created units that have resulted from legislation. (This could be cities, national parks, etc.) Acceptance of names used by other agencies if they conform to other principles (e.g. railway companies, public utilities).
10. How to handle names that could be considered commercial in nature (e.g. sub-division names)
11. How to handle submissions for the use of personal names in a commemorative way. (For example, what is the association with the feature? Is the individual still alive?)
12. If a feature has no name in local use, are there preferred types of names to be used? (For example, descriptive of feature, recalling historical event, traditional name....)
13. Are village council resolutions (or similar formal support) needed for some names to be accepted?
14. Are there particular areas where naming will be kept to a minimum (e.g. wildlife preservation areas)?
15. If names are to be changed from those previously accepted, are there guidelines in place for this to be done consistently and clearly?
16. If many features are to be named by a board, should there be some precedence given to the naming of major features?

These are just a few of the principles that will need to be addressed by any particular names board. It should be understood that the decisions of the board are significant milestones in the official toponymy of a country, and should only be made with all the pertinent material at hand. It is better that a board defers decisions, than make decisions which it alters in a short space of time. The board is looked upon for unbiased judgement, and its integrity and effectiveness are put into question if its decisions are not based on appropriate information and carefully documented principles. Particularly in areas where name changes appear to be likely, a slow and measured approach will likely produce better long-term results than fast decisions based on a weak foundation.

Despite the strongest framework to support a board and its decisions, political interference or short-circuiting of the process by politicians may still be a source of frustration to the board.

4.6 Mission and goals for a national names authority

In today's economy, every government department and agency must continually clarify and strengthen its position, for ongoing funding support and continued existence. For this reason the development of a strategic plan, including a statement of mission, responsibilities and goals may be of assistance. In Canada, such a plan was started in 1989 for the national names authority (then the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names). Several updates within the original framework have been made since then. Canada is an example of a distributed names authority, where the name decision-making powers are primarily with the provinces and territories. These individual jurisdictions look to today's Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) as the umbrella organization for toponymy in the country, and to the Geographical Names Section at Natural Resources Canada to coordinate and guide geographical names activities at the national level.

GNBC Mission

As part of Canada's heritage, the GNBC will promote, through national coordination, the highest quality of toponymic research, the application of standards and principles, and the dissemination of information about Canada's geographical names.

GNBC Mandate

As the national body coordinating all matters affecting geographical nomenclature in Canada, the GNBC has a technical role to record and to approve, through the juris-

dictions of its members, names for official use, in accordance with general principles and standards developed by the Board; and a socio-cultural role to preserve and disseminate information on the historical and cultural significance of Canada's toponyms. The GNBC is also the body that represents Canada internationally in activities relating to toponymic standards and practices outside the jurisdiction of National Defence.

The **core activity areas** of the Geographical Names Board of Canada (Figure 1) are stated as:

- (1) Collection of geographical names across Canada and delineation of their applications
- (2) Automation of geographical names records and assurance of availability of information in automated systems
- (3) Development of national toponymic policies, principles, standards, and guidelines
- (4) Provision of appropriate methodology, tools, and training to support GNBC programmes

(5) Dissemination of accurate toponymic information

(6) Outreach and liaison with the international community

5. Concluding comments

Different models of names authorities, principles and procedures, and modus operandi have been established around the world. Documentation from various countries can be made available to those starting a new programme, and certainly may be a help as a starting point. However, each country will find the formula that best integrates with its own unique structure – political, administrative, linguistic. The most difficult steps are probably the first ones ... obtaining commitments, signing interdepartmental agreements, assuring support to launch a national names authority. We can all learn from your experiences ... so do keep the UNGEGN Secretariat informed of your progress!

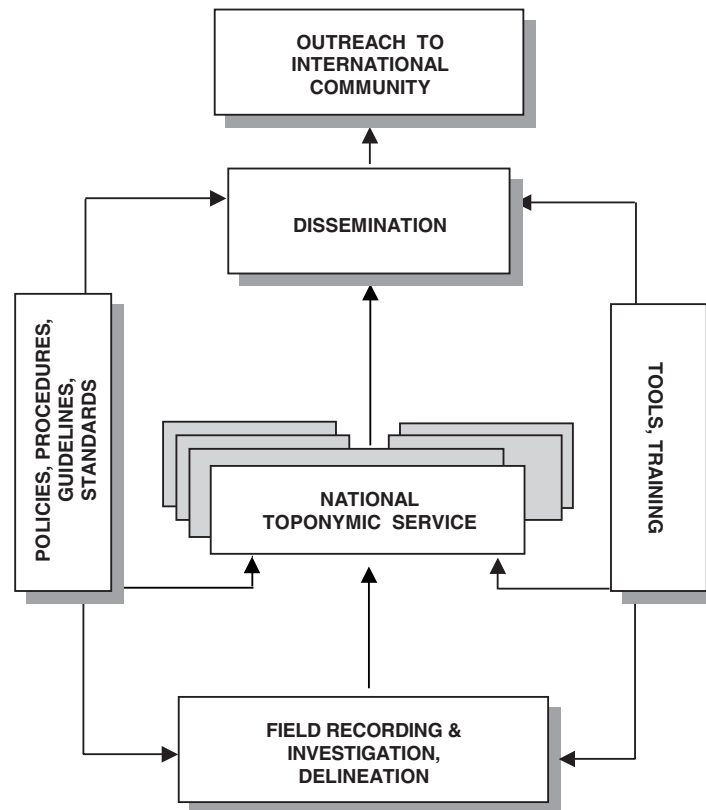


Figure 1 – Core activity areas of the Geographical Names Board of Canada

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Annex

First United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names

Génève, 4–22 September 1967.

Resolution 4 (Part A)

The Conference,

Recognizing that the national standardization of geographical names provides economic and practical benefits to individual nations,

Further recognizing that national standardization of geographical names by all nations is an essential preliminary to international standardization,

1. Requests that the following recommendations on the national standardization of geographical names be reviewed by the proper United Nations authorities;

2. Urges that these recommendations be conveyed to all Member States and interested international organizations for favourable consideration.

Recommendation A. National Names Authorities

It is recommended that, as a first step in international standardization of geographical names, each country should have a national geographical names authority:

- (a) Consisting of a continuing body, or co-ordinated group of bodies, having clearly stated authority and instructions for the standardization of geographical names and the determination of names standardization policy within the country;
- (b) Having such status, composition, function and procedures as will:
 - (i) Be consistent with the governmental structure of the country;
 - (ii) Give the greatest chance of success in the national names standardization programme;
 - (iii) As appropriate, provide within its framework for the establishment of regional or local committees according to area or language;
 - (iv) Provide for consideration of the effects of its actions on government agencies, private organizations and other groups and for the reconciliation of these interests, as far as possible, with the long-range interests of the country as a whole;
 - (v) Make full use of the services of surveyors, cartographers, geographers, linguists and any other experts who may help the authority to carry out its operations efficiently;
 - (vi) Permit record keeping and publication procedures that will facilitate the prompt and wide distribution of information on its standardized names, both nationally and internationally.

It is recommended that those countries which have not yet begun to exercise their prerogative of standardizing their geographical names on a national basis should now proceed to do so.

It is further recommended that the appropriate United Nations office be kept informed by each national names authority of its composition and functions, and of the address of its secretary.