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Reports: Governments on the situation in their countries and on the progress made in the standardization of geographical names

Country report from Australia

Submitted by Australia**

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Summary

This report summarises the Australian arrangements for achieving national standardisation of place names and shares the mission statement of the Permanent Committee on Place Names (PCPN¹).

It also highlights a selection of key projects which have been in focus since the 2017 report.

Background

Within Australia the legislative head of power for place names is distributed across state, territory and commonwealth agencies. Since 1985 national coordination and standardisation has been achieved via the work of the [PCPN](#), membership of which comprises representatives from Australian and New Zealand naming authorities², as well as Australia's national mapping agency³ and Australia's national placenames survey⁴.

The pairing of Australia and New Zealand is common across other spatial committees; an arrangement that provides a valuable forum for sharing learnings and perspectives across the naming and spatial data authorities of both countries. While the mission and role of the PCPN is applicable to members from both countries, each produces its own specific set of policies and principles. This report will focus only on the challenges and programs of work specific to Australia.

Goals and national programs

PCPNs operational and project based work programs are guided by its mission to;

- Provide a framework for standardised place naming practice.
- Provide a framework for delivery of comprehensive place names products
- Facilitate provision of expert advice to government and industry for effective decision making relating to place names
- Facilitate preservation of the heritage and cultural significance of place names.

Individual naming authorities have their own programs of work which contribute towards the national agenda although they are too numerous to mention in this report. A selection of PCPN's major projects and recent achievements are given in the next section.

Problems, solutions and achievements during the reporting period

Nationally consistent feature type classification

At the 11th Conference in 2017 Australia reported on the work undertaken to establish a [nationally consistent feature type classification system](#) as the first step towards modernising the national gazetteer. That work has since been completed, endorsed, and adopted by the naming authorities. Learnings from our application of a previous national classification systems shows that ongoing edits will be required as gazetteer content expands, however it's

¹ Known as the Committee on Geographical Names in Australasia from 1985 until 2016.

² Australia's six states and two internal territories, the Australia Hydrographic Office, the Australian Antarctic Division, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, and the New Zealand Geographic Board.

³ Geoscience Australia

⁴ Australian National Placenames Survey

also acknowledged that continually changing attribute lists impact useability of the data. Any changes to the current classification system will be managed as part of the PCPNs operational role, the goal of which will be to deliver a system that is responsive to evolving classification requirements while remaining static enough to meet data consistency needs.

Composite Gazetteer of Australia

The primary driver for implementing nationally consistent feature types was to streamline development and delivery of Australia's national gazetteer. Traditional methods of manual data manipulation have long been inefficient and unable to meet growing demand for more comprehensive data. Work has begun on developing a new national gazetteer via a portal which receives and publishes a composite (as opposed to collation) of jurisdiction gazetteers.

We hope to be able to share more detail in a future paper, however in brief the goals for the new portal are that it allow more frequent publication of data direct from jurisdictional gazetteers, thereby removing the need for manual intervention while providing a more user friendly interface and giving users the option to choose from a selection of different gazetteer products. It should also more easily facilitate future expansion of the types of names included, the attribute information associated with those names, and the geometry associated with the extent of named features. As well as providing a more comprehensive tool for traditional gazetteer users, we anticipate it aiding Australia's work on developing a useful linked data infrastructure.

Linked data

The [Australian Government Linked Data Working Group](#) and the Location Index Project, part of [Data Integration Partnership for Australia](#), are aiming to provide data in machine readable formats seamlessly through the web. Place names is recognised as an integral part of human understanding of geography and easily recognised by people in relation to their everyday life, so it's seen as a critical component in linking spatial and aspatial data. The Australian Government Linked Data Working Group has published a [Place Names ontology](#) to support the creation of a national Linked Data Place Names data set and PCPN member Geoscience Australia has created infrastructure to mint persistent identifiers for a national place names gazetteer. The aim of this work is to enable the linking of place names, statistical geography and address information to other aspatial and spatial data in human and machine readable formats.

University level toponymy training

PCPN member Placenames Australia has been involved in developing a subject on toponymy at undergraduate level through Open Universities Australia and Macquarie University. The syllabus was designed to make it suitable as a stand-alone subject for students of geography, history and linguistics, or as a professional development course for staff working or intending to work in place naming bodies. [Placenames in the Modern World](#) is available to study online from July 2019.

Naming principles

Mechanisms for acknowledgment of indigenous languages continues to be an ongoing discussion in Australian place naming. Early national principles have always encouraged consideration for indigenous place names although out of respect for the variable legal, social and technical influences across naming authorities they've stayed silent on the specific processes by which naming authorities should achieve that ideal. In the time since PCPN took that position much has changed and there's a need for Australia to attempt more specificity in naming principles that relate to language.

Beyond the indigenous languages focus we've also noted an evolution in three other areas since the committee first documented Australia's place naming principles; (a) the discipline has grown beyond predominantly natural features and there's a broader need for principles to apply to more built infrastructure and administrative areas, (b) the technical and social outcomes we're now trying to achieve extend well beyond the hardcopy cartographic environment which was the primary driver behind the original principles of names standardisation, and (c) what was once a document providing guidance to place naming experts within the committee is seeing increasing use by other organisations and the general public.

Australia's naming principles are certainly not static as there's been an annual maintenance program but the impact of minor edits is limited. With a broadened scope, evolved purpose, and different audience it's time for a major review to check that the principles we promote continue to support our strategic goals, noting that a contemporary and well explained set of principles could provide the obvious benefit of guidance on naming practices while also delivering value as a useful advocacy and education tool.

Conclusions and recommendations

The coordination, leadership, and advocacy role fulfilled by PCPN continues to be a very important part of Australia's ability to deliver ongoing improvements to place names standardisation.

In a world that is increasingly connected the value of comprehensive gazetteers as a core component of linked data infrastructures becomes increasingly critical. The growing realisation and current investment in such work across numerous Australian spatial data authorities is beginning to show the success of PCPN's advocacy although there will always be some way to go; place names are ubiquitous and facilitating access to comprehensive and trusted information is a complex and ongoing challenge.

The PCPN approach in Australia relies not on a single head of power but a network of relationships and projects delivering benefit to an array of stakeholders with local, state and national interests. It's more difficult than being able to set rules to be followed but there's an argument to be made that if done well it can deliver a cohesive, inclusive and respected governance model for place names in Australia. This is the goal and PCPN will continue to direct its energies towards achieving that.