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

Report of Australia

Submitted by Australia**

Summary

The report summarizes the arrangements of Australia for achieving national standardization of place names. It sets out the mission of the Australia and New Zealand Working Group on Place Names – a cooperative of representatives from both nations in which relevant Australian members cooperate in lieu of an official national-level names authority. It also highlights problems, solutions and achievements related to the standardization of Australian place names since the 2019 session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

* GEGN.2/2021/1

Background

How does Australia manage geographical names standardisation?

Within Australia, the legislative head of power for place names is distributed across local, state, territory and commonwealth agencies. National coordination and standardisation is achieved under a framework provide by the ANZWGPN, membership of which comprises representatives from Australian and New Zealand naming authorities¹, as well as Australia's national mapping agency² and Australia's national placenames survey³.

Initially established as an informal committee of Australian experts in 1985, the ANZWGPN (under a previous name) became a standing committee of Australia and New Zealand's Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping in 1993. The move helped formalise a relationship between place names and geospatial information as well as expanding the scope of place naming discussions to include the national names authority of New Zealand; both continue today.

While the mission and role of the ANZWGPN is applicable to members from both countries, each country produces its own specific set of policies and principles and this report will focus only on the challenges and programs of work specific to Australia.

Goals and national programs

The ANZWGPN has a vision of place names connecting people, information and place through the past, present and into the future. The mission of the ANZWGPN (and by inclusion the mission of Australian authorities) is 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.

Within Australia, this mission is achieved through;

- Providing a forum for both formal and informal discussion between representatives of the sub-national names authorities, developing agreed national principles and policies for members to implement within their jurisdictions, and being a community of practice where members can continually deepen their understanding of the complex and nuanced nature of place names.
- Bringing together relevant data managers and technical experts to produce a composite gazetteer of Australia, monitoring the existence and capability of place name products of various scale and scope, and engaging as necessary to guide the development and appropriate use of comprehensive, authoritative, and connected place name products.
- Providing advice to other committees and organisations on place naming matters that relate to their scope of work (specifically in seeking increased support to enhance the management of place name information as part of foundation spatial data frameworks), partnering with relevant groups to understand stakeholder needs, and supporting country level involvement in the UNGEGN network of regional and international conversations and gazetteers.
- Promoting the importance and value of collecting and sharing heritage and cultural information related to place names, developing principles, guidelines and key messages that promote the adoption of nationally standardised practices in relation to recognising and managing names from multiple languages, and advocating for enhancement of

¹ 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.

² Geoscience Australia

³ Australian National Placenames Survey

gazetteers and data portals to make heritage and cultural information more easily discoverable.

Problems, solutions and achievements during the reporting period

Nationally consistent place types

At the 11th Conference in 2017 Australia presented⁴ on work in progress to establish nationally consistent place types as the first step towards modernising a national gazetteer and for the 1st Session in 2019 advised⁵ that a catalogue of nationally consistent place types was completed, endorsed, and adopted by names authorities.

Since then, Australia has published the place type catalogue as part of the Data Product Specification⁶ for the Composite Gazetteer of Australia (the modernised national gazetteer) and as a machine-readable linked data vocabulary⁷, the latter enabling use of both the place types and the gazetteer data by users of linked data technologies.

Incremental edits to the place type catalogue will be required as gazetteer content expands to meet user needs; management is part of the Australian component of the ANZWGPNs operational program.

Modernising development of the national gazetteer

For the 1st session in 2019 Australia reported that the primary driver for implementing nationally consistent place types was to modernise development and delivery of a national gazetteer. As a collation of 10 separate jurisdictional gazetteers, traditional methods of manual data manipulation had long been inefficient and unable to meet growing demand for more comprehensive and frequently updated data products.

Since the last report, Australia released the [Composite Gazetteer of Australia](#). It is created through a semi-automated workflow of receipt, validation, and publication of data from jurisdictional gazetteers. The new approach supports higher frequency data supply direct from jurisdictional gazetteers; removing much of the manual intervention. It also provides a more functional search interface and enables the user to download a range of gazetteer products. The next goal is to expand gazetteer content and enhance search portal functionality.

Linked data implementation

For the 1st session in 2019 Australia reported that a place names ontology had been published to support the creation of a national Linked Data place names dataset, and that infrastructure had been created to generate persistent identifiers for records in the Composite Gazetteer of Australia.

Since then, Australia has [updated the place names ontology, published the place type catalogue as a vocabulary](#), and [developed the place names registry and associate landing pages](#). In addition to increasing useability of place names data specifically, the developments are part of a wider program of work to modernise Australia's Foundation Spatial Data Framework.

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

⁴ https://unstats.un.org/UNSD/geoinfo/UNGEGN/docs/11th-uncsgn-docs/E_Conf.105_136_CRP.136_11_PCPN%20Feature%20Catalogue%20-%20UNGEGN%20Paper%202017%20.pdf

⁵ https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/2019-new-york-ungegn-1st-session/documents/GEGN.2_2019_CRP.116_Country_report_Australia.pdf

⁶ <https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/fsdf.placenames/DPS/Composite+Gazetteer+DPS.pdf>

⁷ <https://vocabs.ardc.edu.au/viewById/260>

for indigenous place names although out of respect for the variable legal, social and technical influences across naming authorities they have stayed silent on the specific processes by which naming authorities should achieve that ideal. Jurisdictions each have their own legislative frameworks and developed policies that support and promote recognition of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. With time passed, we are taking learnings from those various experiences and attempting more specificity in national level naming principles to facilitate consistent outcomes from jurisdictional practices and promote cohesion in the national message.

Additionally, there has been an evolution in three other areas since initially publishing the principles. (a) The focus has grown beyond predominantly natural features and there is a broader need for variation in principles and guidelines so that they also apply to infrastructure and administrative areas. (b) Contemporary technical and social objectives extend well beyond the hardcopy cartographic environment that was the primary driver behind the original principles. (c) Documents originally intended to provide guidance to specific staff with place naming expertise is receiving increased use by non-expert staff, other organisations, and the general public, so consideration is being given to expanding explanations behind some of the guidance.

Australia's naming principles are certainly not static as there's an annual maintenance program but with a broadening scope, evolving purpose, and growing audience we are embarking on a longer review to check that principles are adequate to help guide improved standardisation.

Publicity, funding, and relationships

National standardisation relies not only on cooperation between jurisdictions. There must also be (amongst the various level of government, industry, academia and the public) awareness and support of the national body in fulfilling its mission. Australia still has room for improvement in this area and has been pursuing opportunities across three areas: public information, intergovernmental relations, and stakeholder engagement.

Since the last report:

Work on a website for Australian place names has begun. The aim is to provide a public landing page for information and access to the national gazetteer, national principles, and names authorities. It will also create a platform for conveying the value of national standardisation and sharing key messages from work across Australia.

Building relationships with representatives of other intergovernmental committees has broadened and deepened appreciation for place names and the value of our national cooperative, particularly in relation to geospatial information. This has resulted in the inclusion of our work in the strategic plans of other committees, plus funding and in-kind support for major projects.

A coordinated and effective network of place names activity can be led from within government, but it is through engaging across governments, community groups and academia that an holistic, respectful and standardised national place naming program will be built. With this in mind, we have been growing our collaborations and stakeholder network across indigenous language centre representatives, media, universities, research organisations, museums, and geospatial working groups.

Many of these relationships are still in their infancy although they have already provided;

- use cases in support of gazetteer enhancements,
- expert advice for stakeholders sourcing or managing information,
- sharing of common interests to influence work priorities,
- connectivity with stakeholder projects that help further our mission,
- awareness of our group and the importance of coordinated place names practices across Australia.

International relationships

Since the last report Australia has continued its involvement with UNGEGN, and also become Chair of the Working Group for Antarctic Place Names within SCAR's⁸ SCAGI⁹, a member on GEBCO's¹⁰ SCUFN¹¹, and Interim Co-Chair (along with New Zealand) to activate UNGEGN's Pacific South-West Division.

Sub-national projects

As well as contributing to the initiatives already mentioned, sub-national names authorities have their own programs of work that contribute towards the national agenda. Individual projects are too numerous to mention specifically in this report, although for this reporting period they can be summarised under two main themes.

- Reviewing names and naming practices in relation to diversity and inclusion. For example: engaging with stakeholders on their experiences, spending more time in the community, collaborating across names authorities, promoting indigenous cultures through place names, releasing strategies and policies to increase focus on specific agendas, reviewing committee and board arrangements, expanding guidelines related to names reflecting gender balance and diverse cultural situations, and addressing community sensitivities associated with certain names.
- Improvements to data management practices. For example: enhancing information held within databases, improving access to that information, expanding mechanisms through which the public can submit names or information for consideration, and integrating or embedding place names with other geospatial information.

We aim to share more detail about some of this work in the future.

Conclusions

The coordination, leadership, and advocacy role fulfilled by Australian members of the ANZWGPN 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 role of comprehensive gazetteers 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 our advocacy although there will always be some way to go; place names are ubiquitous and names authorities numerous. Facilitating access to adequate guidance for decision-makers, and to comprehensive and trusted information for users is a complex and ongoing challenge.

The federated approach to a national names authority relies not on a single head of power but on leadership through a network of relationships and projects delivering benefit to an array of stakeholders with local, state and national interests. It is more difficult than having a nationally legislated body that can set rules to follow but if done well it can deliver a cohesive, inclusive and respected governance model. This is the goal and we will continue to work towards achieving that for Australia.

⁸ Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research

⁹ Standing Committee on Antarctic Geographic Information

¹⁰ General Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans

¹¹ Sub-Committee on Undersea Feature Names

