
**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names
2021 session**

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Item 4a of the provisional agenda ***Governments on the situation in their countries and on the progress made in
the standardization of geographical names (for distribution only)****Report of Canada**

Submitted by Canada**

Summary:

Since the first session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, in 2019, the national coordinating body for place names in Canada, the Geographical Names Board of Canada, has made great strides in strategic planning, database automation and standardization, interactive map production, and board governance.

At its 123rd annual general meeting, held in October 2020, the Board approved a new forward-looking strategic plan to guide its direction and work in the coming five years. The strategic plan includes several priorities: review role, mandate and governance; enhance internal and external communication and collaboration; and improve database content and management. To better reflect the reality that indigenous place names and concerns are integral to all aspects and operations of the Board, this work has been incorporated into each of the strategic priorities.

In 2020, the Board's secretariat developed a data-harvesting tool to automatically extract data from a provincial application programming interface and enter it into the Canadian Geographical Names Database. Projects are under way to re-evaluate generic terminology, update the Board's application programming interface and public discovery tool and standardize the contents of the database.

In 2019, an interactive map, entitled "Stories from the land: indigenous place names in Canada", was released to highlight a selection of indigenous place names, as well as their language and meaning.

In 2021, it is expected that a new Chair and indigenous advisers will be appointed to the Board.

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Introduction

The Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) is the national coordinating body responsible for standards and policies for geographical names in Canada. The Board is established under a federal Order in Council, and comprises members from federal, provincial and territorial government departments and agencies, each with specific responsibilities for their respective jurisdictions and mandates. Working together as a multi-jurisdictional national body, GNBC members ensure that geographical names are consistently managed in Canada. The GNBC was initially established as the Geographic Board of Canada in 1897, and will be celebrating 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 as Canada's national naming authority by: developing policies 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 toponymic forums. The GNBC meets in plenary session once each calendar year, 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.

GNBC Leadership

In 2020, an open, transparent, and merit-based process was launched to fill the position of Chairperson of the GNBC, and for a newly established position of Indigenous Advisor to the Board. Following the publically-announced processes, the Minister of Natural Resources Canada appointed Ms. Connie Wyatt Anderson as Chairperson, and Ms. Ava Hill as First Nations Advisor, effective March, 2021.

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.

Several provincial and territorial jurisdictions appoint a naming board to review and recommend naming proposals, while other jurisdictions appoint a government official with expertise in toponymy. In most jurisdictions, recommendations for naming decisions are submitted for approval to a provincial or territorial Minister with legislated responsibility for geographical names. In all cases, once names are approved by a responsible jurisdictional authority, they are recognized and endorsed as official decisions of the GNBC.

On federally-administered lands and waters, naming decisions are made in collaboration by both the provincial or territorial authority and the appropriate federal authority. Federal departments involved in geographical naming include those responsible for undersea features, and lands such as national parks, Indigenous lands, and military establishments.

GNBC 2020-2025 Strategic Plan

At its 123rd Annual General Meeting in 2020, the members of the GNBC unanimously approved a five-year strategic plan to guide the direction of the Board. The Strategic Plan was created over a one year period and was determined through discussion and consensus by the federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities. The Strategic Plan describes the GNBC priorities in an accountable and transparent way for the period 2020-2025. Performance measures indicate how the GNBC will monitor and evaluate progress toward achieving the outcomes identified in the plan. 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.

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

These objectives are implemented through several active working groups and an advisory committee, each focused on specific priority actions outlined in the Strategic Plan. Each group is lead by a federal, provincial or territorial naming authority and comprises other jurisdictional members of the GNBC, supported by the GNBC Secretariat. The working groups and advisory committee meet regularly throughout the year, typically via videoconference, and report on activities and accomplishments at the GNBC's Quarterly and Annual General Meetings.

Improve Database Content and Management

A central role of GNBC naming authorities is the gathering and dissemination of accurate information on the location, delineation and origins of Canada's geographical names. This is accomplished through management of databases in individual jurisdictions, and contribution of that data to the national repository of geographical names, the Canadian Geographical Names Database (CGNDB) maintained by the GNBC Secretariat. Collaborative activities between federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities and the GNBC Secretariat facilitate data interoperability and sharing, ensuring the ongoing update and maintenance of the national database.

In the summer of 2020, the GNBC Secretariat hired a student to work on data harvesting of official geographical names from the British Columbia Geographical Names Web Services. The student created a Python script that successfully harvested data from the provincial site and automatically inputs it into the CGNDB. The script is automatically run every two weeks to ensure that the CGNDB remains current.

In March 2021, the CGNDB migrated from an Oracle/SDE platform to an open source PostGres/GIS environment. This change has enabled the CGNDB to be in a more powerful cloud environment where the official place names data will be easier to access by other spatial products produced by NRCan.

Currently, there are a number of projects underway to improve the content of the CGNDB as well as the way in which it is managed. This includes a review and harmonization of the national database with the jurisdictional databases with the intention of removing inconsistencies and irrelevant data from the national database. This will ensure the national database is built from authoritative data provided by provincial and territorial jurisdictions, and contains a consistent core set of features that are common to all jurisdictions. This project goes

hand in hand with the full review of the feature types contained in the CGNDB: their definitions, organization and current relevance.

The GNBC is also working on a number of projects to improve database management practices related to Indigenous toponymy in Canada. Work is progressing to review the records in the CGNDB to identify place names of Indigenous origin and recording the Indigenous language in the national database. Another effort will involve examining the potential for the inclusion of audio clips to enhance the user's ability to understand the pronunciation of place names. This will aid in the preservation and promotion of the cultural richness of Indigenous languages contained in these place names. Another project related to Indigenous toponymy is the incorporation of Indigenous cultural generics or "topocomplexes" into the data model of the CGNDB. This project will involve extending the national database capacity to accurately record, store and disseminate unique aspects of Indigenous cultural generics using clear and well-documented guidelines.

Indigenous Geographical Names

Recognition and increased awareness of traditional geographical names contributes to the preservation, revitalization and strengthening of Indigenous histories, languages and cultures. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples calls for Indigenous peoples to have the right to designate and retain their own names for communities and places. The GNBC naming authorities have a long-standing interest in researching, documenting and approving place names that have traditional Indigenous origin.

The GNBC's responsibility to accurately record geographical names requires special consideration of Indigenous names and languages. These considerations include evolving orthographies; specialized character sets; accommodating the practice of naming agglomerations of features with a single toponym; officialising multiple names for a single feature; and using unique cultural generics.

In 2017, the GNBC initiated a scan of policies in Canada related to geographical names of Indigenous origin. The intent of the project was to research, document, analyze and summarize how Canada's federal, provincial and territorial naming jurisdictions identify and preserve geographical names of Indigenous origin. In 2018, the GNBC initiated a follow-up study to examine approaches to Indigenous and minority-language geographical naming in other international jurisdictions. In 2020, the GNBC began a national environmental scan on the current state of Indigenous geographical naming activities at the community level in Canada. This research project will conduct a thorough national scan of ongoing and recently completed place naming activities undertaken by Indigenous communities, organizations and governments, as well as other organizations who are working in partnership with Indigenous peoples with respect to place names.

The outcome of this study is a report that summarizes the findings and draws conclusions on the state of Indigenous geographical naming initiatives across Canada. These findings will be used in conjunction with the GNBC's previous International and National Indigenous Naming Scan to create a national Indigenous Geographical Naming Guideline for Canada.

Undersea Feature Naming

The GNBC's Advisory Committee on Undersea Feature Names is chaired and coordinated by the Canadian Hydrographic Service of Fisheries and Oceans Canada. The Advisory Committee is responsible for reviewing undersea and offshore surface maritime feature naming proposals for completeness and conformity with the *Principles for the Naming of Undersea and Surface Maritime Features* approved by the GNBC in 2014. The Advisory Committee investigates and researches naming proposals in collaboration with members of the GNBC to ensure accuracy of supplied information. It then determines suitability of proposals,

and recommends to the GNBC Chair the acceptance or rejection of names of undersea and surface maritime features in Canadian waters.

Enhance External Profile and Collaboration

A key strategic objective of the GNBC is to communicate the benefits of authoritative geographical names, the naming process, and the necessity for rigorous naming standards. The desired outcome of this effort is for Canadians to recognize and appreciate the cultural, historical and practical value of geographical names as a part of their daily lives and shared cultural heritage, along with the key role played by the GNBC to coordinate authoritative geographical naming activities in Canada.

Since the 2019 UNGEGN Session, NRCan and the GNBC have released two interactive maps to the public. On National Indigenous Peoples day in 2019, [Stories from the Land: Indigenous Place Names in Canada](#), an interactive map of a selection of places in Canada with names that have origins in multiple Indigenous languages was released. The sample of names on the map shows the history and evolution of Indigenous place naming in Canada. Additional commemorative geographical names will be added in future releases of this evergreen interactive map.

The second interactive map [Recognizing Women with Canadian Place Names](#) was launched on International Women's Day in 2021. This map highlights a sample of place names across Canada that commemorate women from all walks of life.

Summary

The management and coordination of authoritative geographical names in Canada remains as important now as in 1897 when the national geographical naming authority was first established. The Geographical Names Board of Canada is active and committed to this task through the implementation of priorities and objectives established through its Strategic Plan outlining the direction of the Board until 2025.

Progress on priorities and objectives will be monitored, and reviewed in depth. Any necessary adjustments will be made to evolve and adapt the priorities and objectives toward ultimately realizing the vision outlined in the Plan. The successful execution of this Strategic Plan will help to 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.