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

New York, 3 – 7 May 2021

Item 12 of the provisional agenda *

**Geographical names as culture, heritage and identity, including indigenous,
minority and regional languages and multilingual issues.**

Interactive indigenous place names map for Canada

Submitted by Canada **

Summary:

The naming of places is a cultural phenomenon dating back to the earliest of human history. Assigning names to places is a practice that serves many purposes. Indigenous place names reinforce an intimate relationship with the land, convey a broad range of knowledge such as travel routes and traditional hunting and fishing grounds, and are touchstones for history and legends. They also embody and honour the teachings of elders and are a tool for educating young people.

On National Indigenous Peoples Day in 2019, Natural Resources Canada and the Geographical Names Board of Canada released “Stories from the land: indigenous place names in Canada”, an interactive map of selected places in Canada with names that have origins in multiple indigenous languages. The sample of names on the map shows the history and evolution of indigenous place-naming in Canada.

* GEGN.2/2021/1

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Background

The Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) is the national coordinating body responsible for standards and policies for geographical naming in Canada. The Board is established under a federal Order in Council, and is composed of 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 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 Database (CGNDB), the national database of authoritative geographical names and a key component of Canada's Spatial Data Infrastructure.

The desired outcome of this map 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.

This map is important because it displays the diversity, history and geographical breadth of Indigenous place names across Canada, and highlights the evolution of official naming practices over time with respect to place names that have origins in Indigenous languages. This map also raises awareness of the widespread presence of official place names that originate from many Indigenous languages across the Canadian landscape.

Data Collection and Standardization

Names from all of Canada's provinces and territories, as well as from Parks Canada, and the Department of Fisheries and Oceans were submitted for the project. In total, 789 place names with Indigenous origins were selected by the naming authorities for this map. Each jurisdiction had their own process of selecting official names. Some wanted to demonstrate the wide distribution of names and languages across their province or territory, while others wanted to demonstrate newly approved names. Each naming authority provided a curated list of places with Indigenous origins, based on available historical and current information on the origins of the name. The selection comprises official names of populated places, geographical features such as rivers, lakes and mountains, and sites of cultural importance.

The GNBC Secretariat refined, standardized and amalgamated the data, and collected web links for images from other authoritative sources of information. Historical archives of the GNBC such as naming decisions were also digitized to provide historical information associated with some of the places included on the map.

Map Development

The interactive map took approximately two years to conceptualize, collect, research, standardize, review and edit the data and to create the visual product. In order to best represent the data, the place names data were derived from, or connected to, over 70 different Indigenous languages, and reflect the diversity of Indigenous cultures and their naming practices. Each place name data point on the map is colour-coded for cartographic presentation by language

family according to the 12 ‘macro’ language families defined by Statistics Canada for the 2016 Census. Within these groups are many more individual languages and dialects, including:

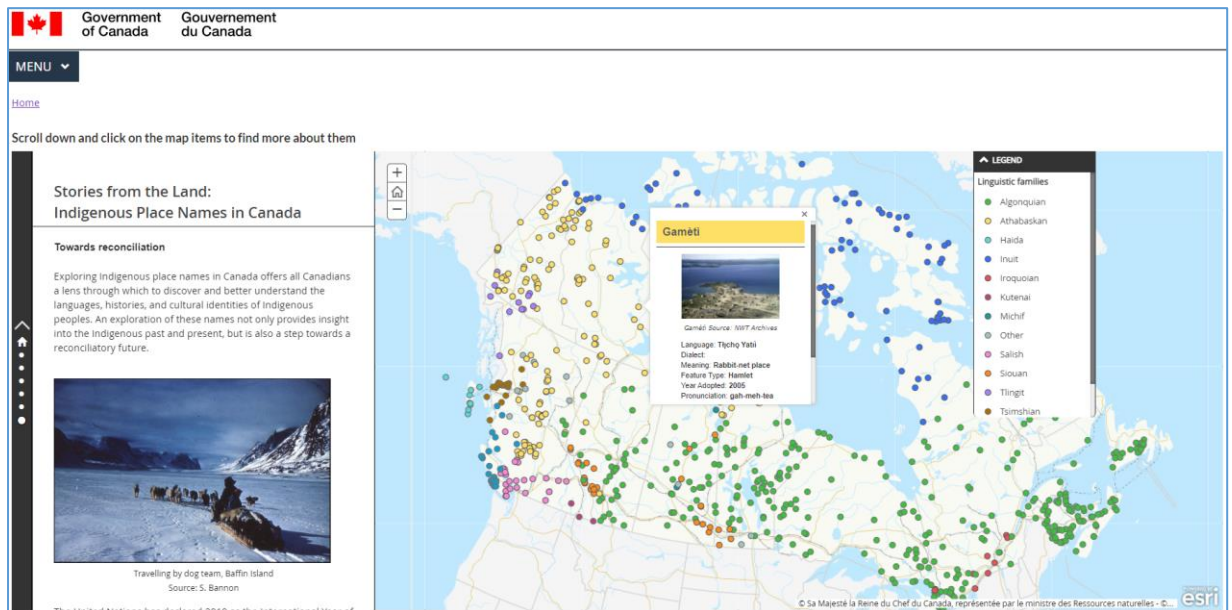
- Algonquian
- Athabaskan
- Haida
- Inuit
- Iroquoian
- Kutenai
- Michif
- Salish
- Siouan
- Tlingit
- Tsimshian
- Wakashan

The interactive format of the map enables ‘story-telling’, therefore the map is comprised of three layers:

1. **Names originating from Indigenous languages:** Official geographical names that are Indigenous in origin, but have been altered or anglicized; these include names of Indigenous origin (for example Oshawa, Nanaimo, Petawawa etc.) and tell the story of how place names were recorded by the non-Indigenous explorers, surveyors and geologists as adaptations of Indigenous words, and originate in Indigenous roots; this is largest dataset;
2. **Reinstated Indigenous place names:** Official geographical names that are Indigenous names adopted by GNBC members to replace European/colonial names (for example Haida Gwaii replacing Queen Charlotte Islands in British Columbia; Iqaluit replacing Frobisher Bay in Nunavut), and shows an evolution toward official adoption of place names in their local orthographies from the languages and dialects and of the original occupants of the territory;
3. **Official recognition of Indigenous place names:** Geographical names that have become official through a process involving Indigenous participation (for example kikiskitotawânawak iskwêwak Lakes in Saskatchewan); these include Indigenous names for features adopted by a GNBC naming jurisdiction through an engagement and validation process with Indigenous communities, and through Land Claims implementation;

The map includes a pop-up box for each geographical name that provides details of the feature:

- Indigenous place name
- Indigenous language
- Dialect (where available)
- Meaning / Translation
- Feature type
- Year adopted
- Image of feature (where available)
- Link to scanned decision document where available
- Learn More / Contact: Link to Indigenous community toponymy initiatives where available and link to naming authority site.



Launch and Promotion

Stories from the Land: Indigenous Place Names in Canada was launched on National Indigenous Peoples Day (June 21, 2019), during the International Year of Indigenous Languages. The official launch took place at the Canadian Museum of History and was followed by an extensive social media campaign promoting the map, as well as media requests from a number of news outlets resulting in a significant number of visitors viewing the map.

This map is evergreen, and will be maintained on an on-going basis. Periodically, additional names will be added to the map from the official records of the GNBC. Canadians are also invited to contribute any supplementary information they have on these place names. The GNBC is examining the potential of enriching the map by adding audio clips with pronunciation to the map.

Conclusion

The *Stories from the Land: Indigenous Place Names in Canada* map has been viewed by thousands of Canadians since launch, and will be updated based on public and GNBC member feedback. The project to develop the map is considered to be a successful and valuable endeavour; through the project, awareness of the role of the GNBC has been heightened at various levels of government, and widely recognized by members of the public. The approach of developing an informative, interactive thematic map will be used again to deliver similar products that highlight official geographical names focussed on specific themes.

Exploring Indigenous place names in Canada offers all Canadians a lens through which to discover and better understand the languages, histories, and cultural identities of Indigenous peoples. An exploration of these names not only provides insight into the Indigenous past and present, but is also a step towards a reconciliatory future. The map may be viewed at: <https://canada.ca/Indigenous-placenames/>

Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to:

- (a) Take note of the work to highlight the history and evolution of Indigenous place naming in Canada;
- (b) Comment and provide input on similar work being carried out in other countries and effective or innovative tools being used.