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

**Indigenous Place Naming Projects in British Columbia
and Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Report from the
BC Geographical Names Office**

Submitted by Canada **

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Summary:

Indigenous place names communicate complex cultural and environmental information through time, and learning the place names in the original languages of the land helps all Canadians to better understand the deep history of where they live.

In British Columbia (B.C.), the Geographical Names Office works on geographical naming projects with Indigenous governments to recognize and restore Indigenous place names onto official maps. These government-to-government relationships are critical to ensuring that the incredible diversity of Indigenous place names are represented accurately and in accordance with their Indigenous laws and cultural practices.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been widespread and most Indigenous communities in B.C. quickly implemented “essential services only” working methods in order to focus efforts on community health and wellbeing. Geographical naming projects have been delayed as a result since government communications have slowed acknowledging the shift in community priorities. The pandemic has also highlighted important messages such as the critical urgency of Indigenous language revitalization work, including place name documentation, in recognition that many Knowledge Holders are in the most vulnerable populations to the virus.

As the COVID-19 vaccination plan unfolds, the BC Geographical Names Office is preparing to better support additional geographical naming projects with Indigenous governments in anticipation of an increase in requests when community resources are able to refocus on the critical urgency of cultural heritage revitalization.

British Columbia (B.C.) is the westernmost province in Canada, bordered on either side by the Pacific Ocean and the Rocky Mountains. It is a large and diverse area, both geographically and demographically, and is predominantly English-speaking.

These lands have always been home to Indigenous Peoples. For millennia, Indigenous cultures thrived with practices that included complex systems of governance, environmental management, and international trade. This continued until the 1800s, when European settlers arrived in B.C. to carry out their colonial expansion using forceful and violent methods to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their land, culture, and languages by making cultural practices illegal and using “education” as a tool to assimilate children into their settler societies. The effects of these traumas and cultural disruption continue today.

Today, there are approximately 200 Indigenous governments within British Columbia, 34 distinct Indigenous languages, and 93+ dialects. The number of speakers for each language varies widely across the province, as do the efforts to revitalize these languages.

Indigenous languages evolved from the land and Indigenous place names are original to the landforms and bodies of water. The number and diversity of Indigenous place names reflects the complexity of the many Indigenous languages.

Place names connect land and culture. Indigenous place names tell the stories, narratives, histories, usage and ecological information of a place through time. This can include origin histories, how people came to be in a place, cultural teachings such as how one should or should not act in a

place, navigational information such as where it is safe to cross a river or where to avoid at certain times of the year, or seasonal food or resources available.

Restoring Indigenous place names to provincial maps increases the visibility of Indigenous cultures in B.C., which maps using only English place names are unable to do. Similarly, maps that use English place names exclusively are only able to reflect a sliver of the history on the land, using references from elsewhere or approximations to describe the area.

Restoring Indigenous place names to B.C. maps represents a large focus for the work undertaken by the BC Geographical Names Office today, as geographical naming practices reflect the heritage and values of a society. For generations, the place names used on B.C. maps have reflected the values of colonial governments, as well as the people and events that were important to government officials and those in power. Many B.C. place names applied during the 1800s and 1900s duplicated or referenced places in England and continental Europe or commemorated people that were in positions of political influence or held in high esteem by settler communities.

Most commonly, government surveyors and their crews assigned place names to what would become official provincial maps. While some place names were adopted as anglicized versions of Indigenous language place names, most were applied to maps without regard for the existing Indigenous place names, effectively erasing them.

Values change, and place-naming processes have changed with them. Today, these practices stress the importance of local community involvement.

In practice, this means that the BC Geographical Names Office requests comments on every naming proposal from the communities and groups affected by it. This includes requesting comments from each of the Indigenous governments whose traditional territories encompass the feature, from the local and regional governments whose boundaries include the feature, and from relevant local organizations (such as search and rescue). While community involvement is necessary for the BC Geographical Names Office to understand the potential impacts of a name change on navigation and emergency response, it is also an occasion to provide partners and stakeholders with an opportunity to recognize the importance of place names and to better understand their role in affirming cultural identity.

This community-focussed process for geographical naming has been in place in B.C. for over a decade; over time, the B.C. government strengthened its commitment to advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. In 2019, the Government of B.C. passed the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, legislation to implement the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) (UNDRIP). Article 13 (section 1) of the UNDRIP specifically states that in addition to preserving their histories, languages, traditions, etc., that Indigenous peoples have the right to “designate and retain their own **names for communities, places and persons.**” Furthermore, section 2 of the article makes it incumbent on the state to ensure these rights are protected.

The BC Geographical Names Office works directly with many Indigenous governments around the province on place naming projects. Sometimes those projects are to directly impact provincial maps by adding Indigenous place names or changing existing English names back to their original Indigenous place names. Sometimes, the place naming projects are to record place names in the database, outside of the name or name change process, and used to begin the education, discussions and research into a name. Working directly with each community ensures that the place names data is accurate, complete and in accordance with the appropriate Indigenous laws.

Learning Indigenous place names allows Canadians to learn the deep history of where they live. Learning the original uses, teachings or narratives gives a different perspective on places that people frequent everyday. It may change behaviours toward places, raise questions and stimulate interest in learning more.

To help the public learn Indigenous place names, the BC Geographical Names Information System distributes and makes available all the official names in B.C. It holds name records with detailed information including the origins and histories of names, audio files, pronunciation keys and images as available. Since orthographies are as diverse as the 34 distinct Indigenous languages and 93+ dialects, sometimes the images are of the correct or preferred spellings when the system is unable to support the special characters or diacritics, or when there are additional ways of spelling a name. Audio files are available for the correct pronunciation of a name, repeated three times, so a learner can hear the sounds and connect it to the written name and place.

Showcase maps are offered to present certain groupings of place names, such as Nisga'a place names, to point people to the name records without the need for them to know where on the map to look or how to spell a name. Search methods in the BC Geographical Names Information System are being continuously expanded to aid in research and education projects. Current search methods include inputting a specific name or word, zooming to a map area and seeing all the names in the area, seeing recent decisions or changes made, and searching by themes identified in the system. More themes, or tags, are being created to capture different nuances of Indigenous place names.

The COVID-19 pandemic began in B.C. in March 2020. By mid-March, the province had declared a state of emergency, travel was restricted and remote working wherever possible became the norm. Necessarily, all levels of government turned their focus and resources to community health, safety, and well-being. Most Indigenous governments quickly implemented 'essential services only' working methods, providing the provincial government with communication guidelines limiting topics to critical health and safety referrals only.

For the BC Geographical Names Office, this meant that many of the geographical naming projects with Indigenous communities experienced long delays or came to a halt. For many small communities, the people working on language and cultural revitalization are the same people responsible for communication or coordination of community services or they are needed to support that work. Even where some communities could support existing geographical names projects, the prospects were small that all neighbouring communities with overlapping territories would be able to respond to the BC Geographical Names Office's request for comments. In recognition of the severe impacts on Indigenous governments capacities and in an effort to avoid putting undue pressure on them, the BC Geographical Names Office extended the existing comment periods on naming proposals started before the pandemic began based on regional communication guidelines. Most comment periods were extended for many months, or for the entire year in some cases.

In addition to highlighting the pressure placed on community resources, the COVID-19 pandemic has sharply underscored the critical nature of the work to transmit and document Indigenous languages and place names. Most of the Knowledge Holders in communities are Elders, in the most vulnerable populations to the virus. This work cannot happen without their input.

Use of technology and virtual tools have increased everywhere during the pandemic, and some communities are in a position to use them for cultural teachings such as 'word of the day' language posts or videos shared with community networks or on social media. Virtual meetings have kept communication going across families, colleagues, sectors and physical distances while keeping people safe from the virus. Not everyone has benefited from these practices. Some communities face the struggle of no, or unreliable, access to the internet or lack access to devices for community members to participate, and other communities have all of their resources dedicated solely to the health and safety of their members.

Technology and virtual tools have an important role in education and widespread sharing of information, but the pandemic experience has demonstrated that they will never replace in-person interactions and conversations needed for interpersonal relationships. When it is safe to do so again, there will always be an advantage to in-person meetings when discussing place-based cultural heritage, especially in combination with the technology tools that support documentation and sharing of language and place names information wherever possible.

The roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines is underway in B.C., starting with the front-line healthcare workers and the most vulnerable populations and aiming to immunize every person who wants it by the late summer 2021. As provincial health orders and precautions ease, it is anticipated that community attention will quickly return to addressing the critical need for cultural heritage knowledge transmission and documentation. The BC Geographical Names Office is assessing its own resources and tools available to support more work with Indigenous governments, so it will be ready to respond when the time comes.

Related links:

BC Geographical Names Information System: <http://apps.gov.bc.ca/pub/bcgnws/>

First Peoples' Cultural Council: <https://fpcc.ca/>

Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to:

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