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English

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

**2023 session**

New York, 1 – 5 May 2023

**Item 10 of the provisional agenda \***

**Toponymic education**

**Dissemination and Promotion of Indigenous Place  
Names**

**Submitted by Canada\*\***

**Summary:**

An estimated 30,000 official place names in Canada have origins in Indigenous languages and cultures. Efforts are ongoing by the federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities of the Geographical Names Board of Canada to research, restore and promote traditional names that reflect Indigenous heritage. Natural Resources Canada maintains the national database of place names on behalf of the Names Board.

In 2022, Natural Resources Canada released the Indigenous Geographical Names Dataset, which identifies official geographical names with origins in Indigenous world views. It contains core spatial data for each name, along with the Indigenous language of origin identified with an International Organization for Standardization standard. The data are presented through an interactive web mapping service on the web pages of the Names Board and are available to download as open data.

Working in partnership with the Innu Nation of Labrador, the Geographical Names Board of Canada has incorporated audio recordings of pronunciations of over 400 Innu-aimun language place names in the public search tool of the national database. A corresponding interactive index map helps to ensure that users are able to find the records, learn the names and hear their pronunciation.

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\* GEGN.2/2023/1

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## **Dissemination and Promotion of Indigenous Place Names**

### **Context**

The Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) is the national coordinating body responsible for principles, procedures and guidelines for geographical naming in Canada. The Board 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.

### **Indigenous Geographical Names in Canada**

Indigenous geographical names are a significant component of Canada's toponymic landscape. An estimated 30 000 official place names in Canada have origins in diverse Indigenous languages and cultures. These names have roots in the worldviews of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples (the three recognized Indigenous groups in Canada) and identify a range of geographical features in every corner of the country.

Indigenous geographical names play an important role in preserving and strengthening endangered Indigenous languages and cultures, and their official recognition is a priority of the GNBC and NRCan.

### **Indigenous Geographical Names Dataset**

In June 2022, NRCan released a dataset of over 20 000 Indigenous geographical names officially recognized by the GNBC. The dataset is extracted from the CGNDB and includes the names of populated places and administrative areas, water features such as lakes, rivers and bays, and terrain features like mountains, capes and valleys. The data are provided by federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities, and is refreshed weekly to ensure it is current with any newly identified and approved names.

The dataset is populated with official geographical names that have been identified as Indigenous in origin by GNBC toponymists. The names have origins in various aspects of Indigenous culture, including language, heritage, personal names and cultural practices. The names may be in an identified Indigenous language, English, French, or a language no longer identifiable due to corruptions, orthography changes, or spelling contractions over time. Records in the dataset contain the Indigenous language of origin for the names, when known. The dataset includes new geographical names from Indigenous communities, reinstated Indigenous names that replace settler names, and names that are identified through data mining and research of historical names in the database and archival materials.

The dataset is freely available as open data for the public to access and download in four formats (csv, shp, kml, and as a Web Mapping Service). An index map of the data was created to visualize the extent and distribution of Indigenous place names across Canada. Users can click various points on the map to learn the associated Indigenous language where available, along with the coordinates, feature type, approval date, and the naming authority that approved it.

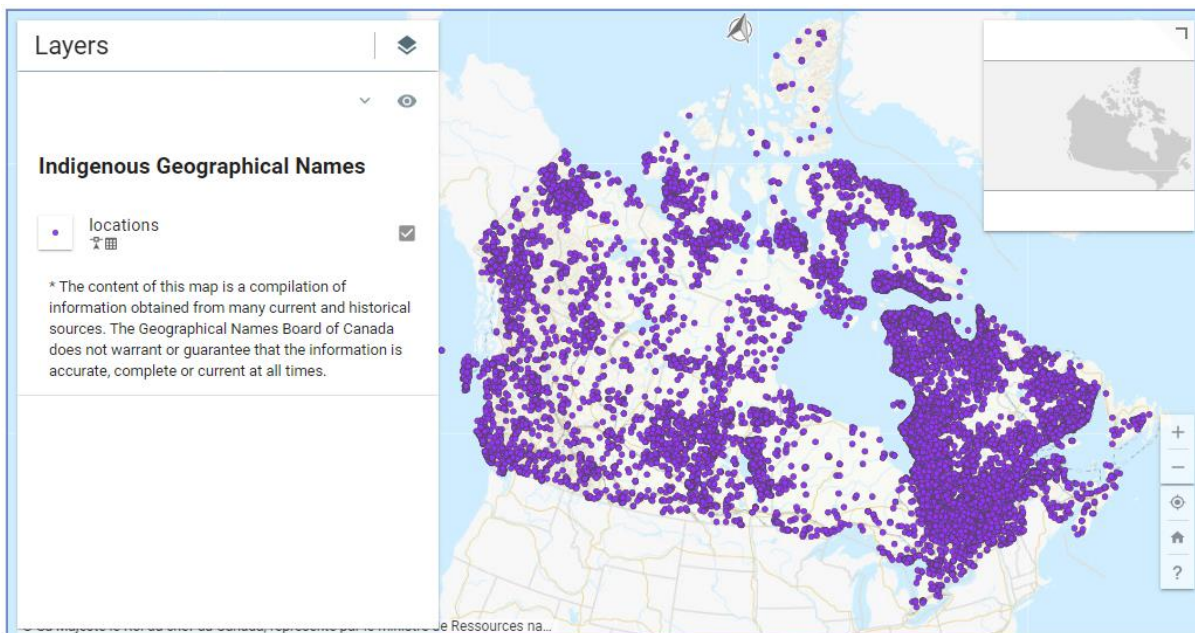


Figure 1 – Index map for the Indigenous Geographical Names Dataset

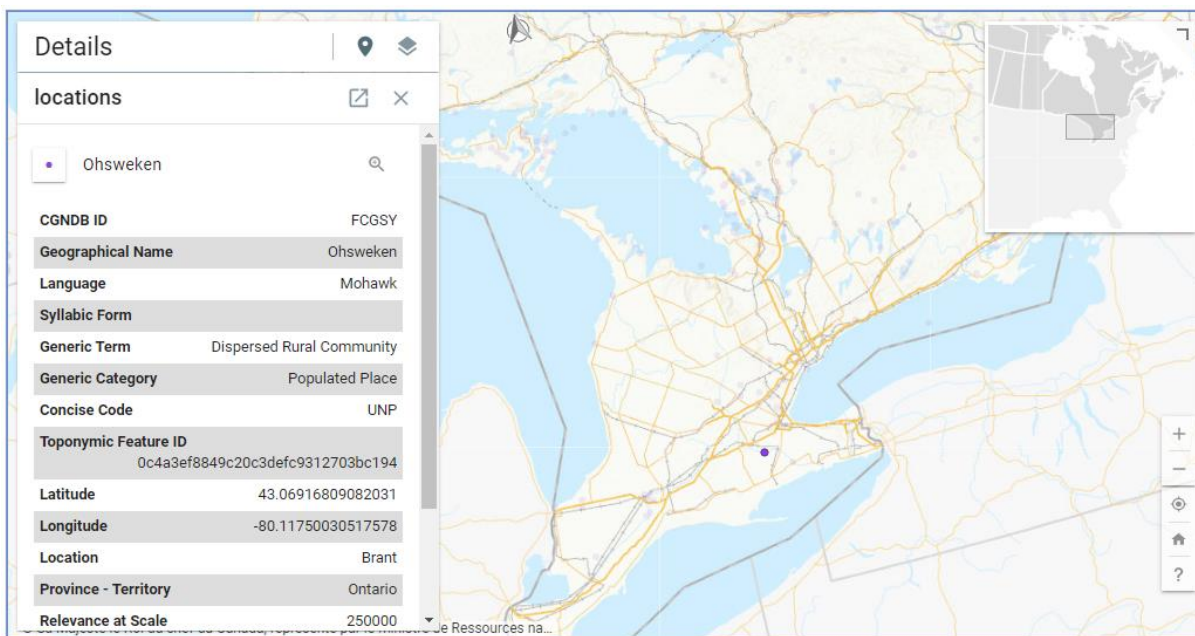


Figure 2 – Query of the geographical name **Ohsweken** in the Mohawk language

### ISO Coding for Indigenous Languages

The Indigenous language of origin for place names, where known, is recorded in the national database using the ISO 639-3 language coding standard. There are 67 Indigenous languages identified in the database using ISO 639-3, however there are gaps in the standard and not all Indigenous languages in Canada are reflected. This results in many geographical names in the database that are Indigenous in origin that have inaccurate or missing language information. Where an ISO 639-3 code is not available, the code for ‘Uncoded Language’ has been applied to over 800 records as a placeholder until an appropriate code is developed. Additionally, ISO 639-3 does not reflect the correct spelling for some Indigenous languages used in Canada. NRCan has been investigating other methods of recording Indigenous languages, but is hesitant to move away from this internationally recognized standard.

## Audio Recordings of Indigenous Names

In September 2022, NRCan launched an interactive map with audio recordings in the Innu language for over 400 official geographical names. This work was inspired by the toponymic research of the Innu Nation in Newfoundland and Labrador, which included collection of audio recordings spoken in Innu-aimun, their language. Making audio recordings broadly available increases the opportunity to hear Indigenous languages and helps non-Indigenous language speakers learn how to properly pronounce complex names.

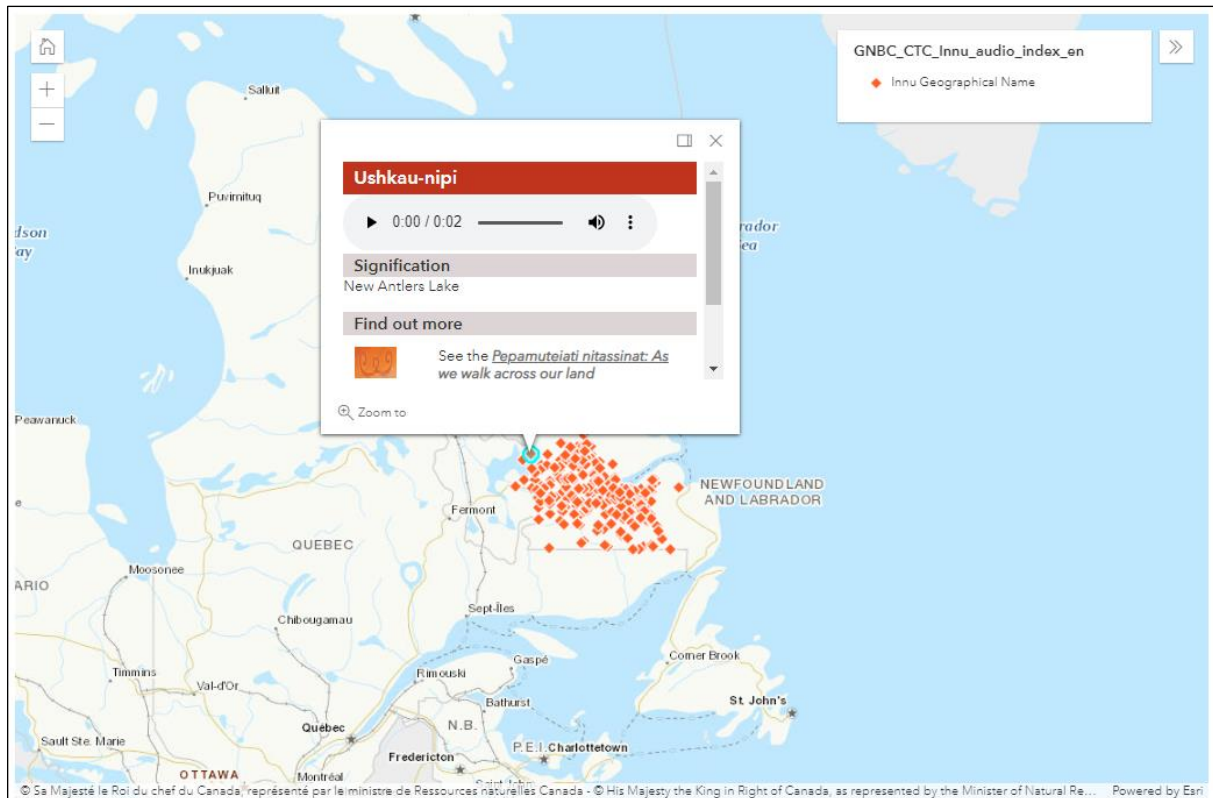


Figure 3 – Index of audio files for geographical names in Innu-aimun

The audio files of the place names are the intellectual property of the Innu Nation, and a licensing agreement was developed for NRCan to use the names. NRCan worked with the Innu Nation on a licensing agreement to obtain access to the audio files and make them available through the NRCan website. The points on the index map link to Innu Nation’s audio, provide a translation of the name to English and French, as well as hyperlinks to the records of the name in the CGNDB and to the Innu Nation’s web site ([Pepamuteiati nitassinat: As we walk across our land](#)). Links to each audio file are also incorporated on the public search tool allowing users, when looking at a record for an Innu place name, to click an icon, and hear an Innu-aimun language speaker say the name of the feature.

## Promotion of Indigenous Geographical Names

Communication and promotion of the Indigenous Geographical Names Dataset and the Innu-aimun audio for place names to the public was done in similar ways. A web page for each product was created on the NRCan website with background information and an interactive map to provide a visual index and interface for the data.

It was appropriate to communicate the release of Indigenous-related geographical name data using communications products prepared in Indigenous languages. Posts in Inuktitut, Mi’kmaq and Algonquin were developed to announce the launch of the Indigenous Geographical Names Dataset through NRCan’s Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn social media channels. Similarly, posts were

developed in Innu-aimun to announce the launch of the Innu audio files. The Innu map and audio files were also formally launched at the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary meeting of the GNBC in Ottawa, in October 2022.

## Conclusion

NRCan and the GNBC will continue to focus on official recognition, dissemination and promotion of Indigenous geographical names, as they play an important role in preserving and strengthening endangered Indigenous languages and cultures. These efforts are aligned with marking the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, and with Canada's implementation of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*.

Ongoing research of historical archives and data mining of the national geographical names database is expected to increase the number of records identified in the Indigenous Geographical Names Dataset. Related to the national database, NRCan will research and submit change requests for the ISO 639-3 language coding standard to accurately reflect Indigenous languages in Canada and enable recording of the language of origin of Indigenous geographical names.

Audio recordings are an effective tool for preserving Indigenous languages and disseminating the proper pronunciation of Indigenous place names. Methods to include audio recordings from other Indigenous Nations in other languages in the national names database will be investigated.

Broad promotion of official Indigenous geographical names using communications products in Indigenous languages, for example social media posts, is vital for respecting the work completed by Indigenous Nations to research and document the names.

Related Links:

[Indigenous Place Names \(canada.ca\)](#)

[Indigenous Geographical Names Data \(canada.ca\)](#)

[Innu-aimun audio for place names in Labrador \(canada.ca\)](#)

## Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to:

- (1) Take note of the efforts made to preserve and promote Indigenous languages and Place Names
- (2) Review the related links promoting Indigenous Place Names
- (3) Provide guidance on the use of ISO 639 language code in Member State/National Names Authorities databases, or provide comment on the use of alternative language codes.