

10 March 2025

English

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

### **2025 session**

New York, 28 April – 2 May 2025

Item 4 (b) of the provisional agenda \*

**Reports: Governments on the situation in their countries  
and on the progress made in the standardization of  
geographic names**

## **Report of Australia**

Submitted by Australia

### **Summary \*\***

The report is focused on the work undertaken in support of item 4 (b) of the provisional agenda for the two-year period since the 2023 session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

The Place Names Working Group continues to fulfil the role of national naming authority in Australia, ensuring the strategic objectives of the Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping are met.

The report is focused on the following areas, which are not covered in technical papers: meetings and promotional opportunities, efforts to standardize geographical names, the collection and treatment of names, data management and services, names within Antarctica, coastal and international waters, and international cooperation.

The Group of Experts is invited to express its views on the report and discuss the work undertaken in Australia.

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\* GEGN.2/2025/1

\*\* Prepared by Mr Rafe Benli, Australia, Place Names Working Group, Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping

## Background

Within Australia the power to name is distributed across national, State, Territory and local levels of government. National collaboration is undertaken through the Place Names Working Groups (PNWG) (previously known as the Australian and New Zealand Working Group on Place Names). Membership to PNWG includes representatives from Australian and New Zealand government naming authorities and Australia's national mapping agency. Observers are often invited which include the Australian National Placenames Survey and First Languages Australia. The PNWG<sup>1</sup> operates under the Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping (ICSM)<sup>2</sup>, which is a standing committee of the Australian and New Zealand Spatial Information Council (ANZLIC)<sup>3</sup>.

## Collaboration

### National

### *Meetings*

Since the 3rd UNGEGN session in 2023 the PNWG has held two teleconferences and two face to face meetings. Alongside the face-to-face meetings two workshops have covered the review of Australia's 'Principles for the Consistent use of Place Names', discussed later in this report.



*Image of the PNWG members and observers at the South Australia face to face annual meeting 2024.*

Additionally, PNWG members have collaborated at conferences and an Indigenous Mapping Workshop which held a place names session to present directly to and engage with First Nation peoples on the review of the national principles document.

### **UNGEKN Bulletin**

PNWG members recently collaborated on the UNGEGN Bulletin titled 'The role of geographical names in preserving cultural heritage'. The topic offered the opportunity for PNWG members to gain a greater understanding about the role of UNGEGN and the bulletin.

### **Observers**

PNWG continues to collaborate with the Australian National Placenames Survey (ANPS) and First Languages Australia (FLA) and other bodies as the need arises.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.icsm.gov.au/what-we-do/place-names-working-group>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.icsm.gov.au/about>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.anzlic.gov.au/>

ANPS undertakes the study of Australasian placenames, and this information is put before the public in the following ways, a quarterly newsletter, which includes articles on Australasian placenames and general toponymic items of interest, publications on recent toponymic research, scheduled spots on radio as well as providing advice to media outlets and attending community meetings. Additionally, a database of over 360,000 items, supported by 18,700 citations from around 800 different sources.

FLA is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language centres and programs and has had great success in the development and establishment of productive partnerships.

### International

#### ***Sub-Committee on Undersea Feature Names***

In November 2023, the Australian Hydrographic Office (AHO) (a member of the PNWG), hosted the International Hydrographic Office, GEBCO (General Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans) Sub-Committee on Undersea Feature Names (SCUFN) in Wollongong, Australia. There were 47 attendees from 21 countries, including 13 committee members.

There were over 450 proposals, reportedly almost double the usual amount, partially due to a backlog over COVID years. In future, countries will be limited to 25 proposals per year, and the first 250 submissions in total will be considered.

Seven of the eight AHO submissions which included undersea canyons off the south coast of Australia were accepted. The eighth was a separate branch that was considered to be part of one of the other canyons and was merged into the accepted feature. Australia requested to be added to a List of Naming Authorities – therefore indicating that Australia, through the AHO, wants to be kept informed when SCUFN receives a proposal for an undersea feature name that is within its official or claimed area of jurisdiction.

#### ***Standing Committee on Antarctic Geographic Information***

Australia continues to host the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) Composite Gazetteer of Antarctica on behalf of the Standing Committee on Antarctic Geographic Information (SCAGI) which is a sub committee of SCAR.

### **Standardisation**

#### National Gazetteer

The PNWG has as a member, Geoscience Australia (GA) who operates as Australia's national mapping agency and hosts the Composite Gazetteer of Australia<sup>4</sup>. As of February 2025 the gazetteer contains 289,574 place names, with work continuing to ensure the gazetteer is authoritative and up to date. PNWG regularly discuss the usability of the gazetteer and its authoritativeness. Currently GA provides monthly statistics on the gazetteer usage and number of features provided by PNWG members. A typical monthly report can be viewed online: [https://elvis-analytics.s3.amazonaws.com/Place\\_Names\\_Analytics\\_Report\\_31230\\_Generated\\_24-10-02.html](https://elvis-analytics.s3.amazonaws.com/Place_Names_Analytics_Report_31230_Generated_24-10-02.html)

One of the focuses is to ensure that members are all uploading agreed features so products can be created from the gazetteer. The examples below show data inconsistencies with feature classifications as applied by different states. This provides direction to PNWG members to review data and determine what can be reclassified or determine where the data is being held and begin the process of including in future uploads.



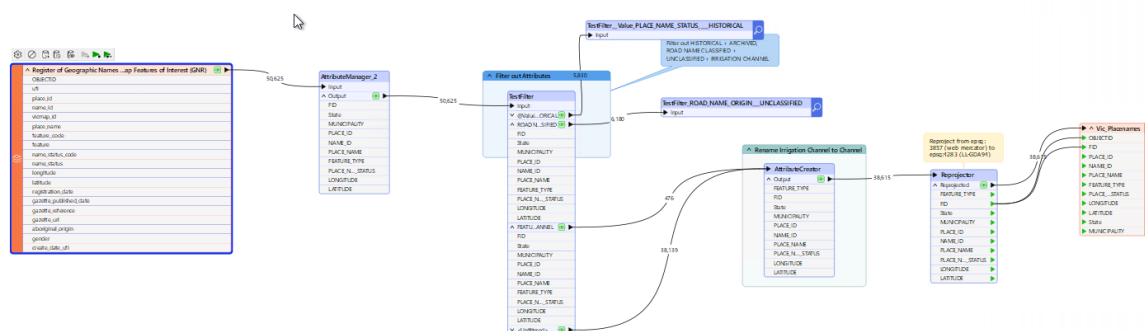
<sup>4</sup> <https://placenames.fsdf.org.au/>

Within the Composite Gazetteer of Australia, the top ten most populated geographic place names include:

FEATURE	AAD	ACT	AHO	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	Grand Total
WATERCOURSE	8	125	21	16,267	1,984	15,446	2,808	3,781	5,932	3,638	<b>50,010</b>
BORE				328	2,457		5,934		23	14,253	<b>22,995</b>
HOMESTEAD		106			263	12	14,069		2	4,249	<b>18,701</b>
LOCALITY		122	2	4,575	282	3,334	1,961	777	3,418	1,710	<b>16,181</b>
PARISH OR HUNDRED				7,469	23	5,302	561		2,004		<b>15,359</b>
PARK		103		6,211	345	2	2,355	452	4,023	1,739	<b>15,230</b>
HILL	85	59	9	3,208	477	711	2,974	2,074	1,173	2,507	<b>13,277</b>
MOUNTAIN	347	47	8	1,691	563	2,218	505	688	752	786	<b>7,605</b>
DAM		4		148	626		4,203		184	1,114	<b>6,279</b>
SURVEY MARKER				4,723	114		560	2	404	18	<b>5821</b>

**Legend:** AAD = Australian Antarctica Division, ACT = Australian Capital Territory, AHO = Australian Hydrographic Office, NSW = New South Wales, NT = Northern Territory, QLD = Queensland, SA = South Australia, TAS = Tasmania, VIC = Victoria and WA = Western Australia

As well as ensuring that the data is authoritative, we need to ensure that it is current. Some PNWG members have moved to monthly and even weekly automated updates utilising FME. The image below shows an indicative FME workbench process.



Once the computer-to-computer connections are made, this enables automatic updates. A report is sent to the PNWG member to review and check for any issues. This has proved useful, with the process being shared amongst PNWG members.

### *Feature catalogue / vocabulary*

Another focus of the PNWG is the national catalogue of place types, known as the national feature catalogue<sup>5</sup>. Currently an excel spreadsheet, this is being turned into a controlled vocabulary maintainable via a GitHub repository, with the information being stored in a standards compliant resource descriptor framework (RDF) file. This will see categories and themes being removed in favour of overarching concepts which progressively narrow down, creating a hierarchy of place types. The expectation is that the Composite Gazetteer of Australia will utilize this updated feature list and PNWG members will either adopt or map to the new feature vocabulary.

### *Linked data methodologies*

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.icsm.gov.au/publications/working-group-place-names-feature-catalogue>



Promoting adoption of the national feature catalogue is an avenue pursued by the PNWG in the interest of achieving consistency in place naming practices. A specific method to promote the re-use of the authoritative information contained in the catalogue is to make it available as linked data.

To this end, a persistent identifier for the feature catalogue has been registered with the Australian Government Linked Data Working Group, resulting in a URL where the information can be obtained. This URL points to a presentation system where the feature catalogue's RDF is published online. This presentation system interprets the RDF into a human readable interactive format, and into various standards-compliant machine-readable formats such as json and turtle.

In essence, each defined term, its definition and other metadata is available at a unique URL, that may be consumed in third-party systems.

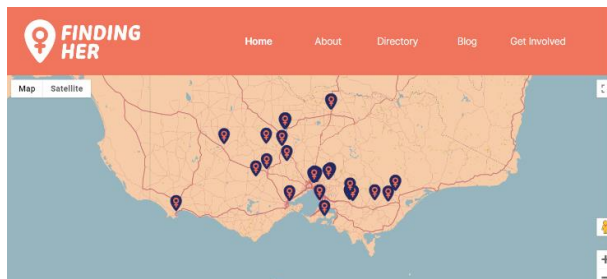
## Promotion

### *Sub-national Awards*

Many members use place names to promote the work of their respective jurisdiction and at the community level the work of local governments, Traditional Owner groups, local community members and historical societies. The PNWG has been considering whether an 'Excellence in geographic place naming award' could be nationalised which would further highlight the importance of geographic names and benefits to society. Images below show award winners from Victoria's 'Excellence in geographic place naming award'.



### *Gender equality*



Another way to highlight the importance of geographic names has seen Victoria partner with organisations in the gender equality space. This has seen the creation of a new website, "Finding Her", which shines a light on the stories of women. It is hoped that as stories are added to the site that the women highlighted could have geographic places commemoratively named in their honor.

The application would be simple to expand to a national audience. It is hoped PNWG members will consider how this could work for their jurisdiction. <https://findingher.org.au/>

### *Recognising our communities*

Thousands of names are required each year across Australia for geographic places and roads. PNWG members want to ensure names recognise the people who helped make our communities thriving places. In Victoria, the public are being invited to nominate someone who has made a significant contribution to be considered for a new place name, particularly individuals from under-represented groups including women, First Peoples and multicultural communities. Nominations will be added to a council name bank, to be considered when places need naming. The campaign can be viewed online: <https://engage.vic.gov.au/name-a-place>





The Australian Capital Territory has a new way to commemorate two people with the same last name. Co-naming, in this example, a division (locality/ suburb). Previously honoring William Spence (1846 – 1926) the division was co-named to honor Catherine Helen Spence (no relation) an advocate for female suffrage and electoral reform and the first female political candidate in Australia.

<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1Nbez7MRe1/>

## Policy and education

### National

#### Principles

The new principles, which will replace the Principles for the Consistent Use of Place Names, are designed to reflect evolving community expectations, particularly regarding cultural sensitivity and inclusivity. Central to this update is the active involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, whose feedback is essential to ensure the principles respects and reflects their aspirations for place naming. This engagement fosters greater diversity and inclusion, not only within the spatial profession but also in the broader community.

In line with global trends in geospatial data and sustainability, the Australian Place Naming Principles incorporates principles set out by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names. This ensures the principles adheres to international best practices while supporting Australian government authorities in updating and aligning local place naming policies and guidelines that enhance the effectiveness of public services and reflect the diverse values of communities.

These principles also support the development of unique and unambiguous addressing, essential for effective service delivery. By establishing clear and consistent road and locality naming practices, they aim to improve the precision of geospatial data, ensure accurate service provision, and enhance emergency response and accessibility.

The work to deliver this important document has been considered over many years, culminating in workshops with PNWG members at annual face to face meetings. It is expected first draft will be made available in early April 2025.

#### Term of Reference

Over the past two years PNWG have been considering amendments to our Terms of Reference. Our vision remains unchanged *“Place names connecting people, information and place from the past, through the present and into the future.”*

The purpose of PNWG also remains unchanged, in that it aims to achieve the standardisation of place names across Australia and New Zealand, to deliver cohesive governance around the decision-making, recording, and use of place names. It does this by:

- Providing a framework for delivery of standardised place naming practices.
- Providing a framework for delivery of comprehensive place names product.
- Facilitating provision of expert advice to government and stakeholders for effective decision making relating to place names.
- Facilitating preservation of the heritage and cultural significance of place names

Changes have been made to the membership of the group, specifically who can vote and who is an observer, who resides on the PNWG executive, and the terms of appointment.

### ***Offensive names***

As highlighted in the Australian paper "Amplifying First Nations languages in Australia", PNWG is aware of derogatory and offensive names within the landscape across the continent. Many PNWG members have policies and processes in place to deal with the removal of such names. PNWG collaborate closely on names, and terms which may be considered offensive and or derogatory. The topic is now discussed annually at our face to face meeting to understand if new terms, words and geographic place names need to be considered. A specific example is covered in the aforementioned paper.

### **Sub-national**

**Australian Capital Territory:** As a result of a private member's bill presented in the ACT Legislative Assembly, an amendment to the *Public Place Names Act 1989* became effective on 29 September 2022. The amendment has removed the word 'colonisation' and substituted 'reconciliation' in the naming criteria.

The *Public Place Names Act 1989* requires that the Minister must consider the number of women and men after whom divisions (localities/suburbs) or public places have been named in the last 10 years and whether the names of women are well-represented. Since 2014, 243 women and 250 men have been commemorated. This includes 34 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and 61 people from a culturally and linguistically diverse background.

**Australian Hydrographic Office:** Minor adjustments to the Undersea Feature Name submission form<sup>6</sup> were made to align with the IHO/IOC B-6 Form.

**South Australia:** The following policies have been introduced, Principles of Indigenous Naming, Indigenous Place Naming Information Fact Sheet, Approval process for Indigenous Naming proposals, Indigenous Naming FAQ's<sup>7</sup>.

**New South Wales:** The Geographical Names Board (GNB) of NSW has launched several videos to educate the public on place naming matters, including:

- The place naming process in NSW: <https://vimeo.com/1010486076>
- Offensive Names: <https://vimeo.com/818950845/3f69f2ef28>
- Reawakening Aboriginal Place Names: <https://vimeo.com/918139642/086ec9d983>

The Reawakening Aboriginal Place Names video is being broadcast nationally on SBS National Indigenous Television (NITV) and SBS on demand. The video first screened just ahead of NAIDOC week (7 -14 July 2024) and will be shown for the next three years as an interstitial between shows.

The Geographical Names Board of NSW Policy – Place Naming (the policy) is under review, with the latest published version being released in 2019. The policy sets out principles for the selection of place names in NSW. The updated policy will be open for public feedback in March 2025 to ensure that the updated content is relevant, fit for purpose and reflects community expectations, which can change over time.

**Northern Territory:** Restructuring the assessment and evaluation of place naming proposals through the development of forms and checklists for internal and external use. New forms ensure requestors and staff fully address the requirements for place naming as detailed by the Committee's guidelines as well as documentation of engagement and consultation. This has supported provision of timely and consistent guidance to parties preparing submissions to the Committee and reduced perceived administrative delays.

The following policy was updated, Aboriginal Place Names and Dual Naming policy<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.hydro.gov.au/factsheets/F\\_05\\_51\\_AA451800\\_AHO\\_Undersea\\_Feature\\_Proposal\\_Form.doc](https://www.hydro.gov.au/factsheets/F_05_51_AA451800_AHO_Undersea_Feature_Proposal_Form.doc)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.sa.gov.au/topics/housing/planning-and-property/suburb-road-and-place-names/place-names-proposals/geographical-names-guidelines>

<sup>8</sup> [https://placenames.nt.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/1061714/aboriginal-place-names-and-dual-naming-policy.pdf](https://placenames.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/1061714/aboriginal-place-names-and-dual-naming-policy.pdf)

**Victoria:** A series of projects under the 'Our equal places'<sup>9</sup> banner to support greater diversity in naming, with a particular focus on gender equality. The Minister for Planning the Hon Sonya Kilkenny announced that all future commemorative names up to 2027, 70% should commemorate women. An ambitious target which is being supported by Geographic Names Victoria (GNV).

GNV has also held dozens of information and training sessions to bring, council officers and State government departments and agencies and Land Surveyors up to speed with the latest in best practise naming.

### Data services and management

With GA managing on PNWG members behalf the Composite Gazetteer of Australia. Members also have their own gazetteers in various formats, often prescribed by legislation. These repositories can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.icsm.gov.au/individual-state-and-territory-gazetteers>.

PNWG members are often asked for statistics and facts, this includes information covering whether a name is Aboriginal in its origin, the gender of a name if commemorative, the history behind a name, pronunciation of a name, when a name became official i.e. gazetted and registered.

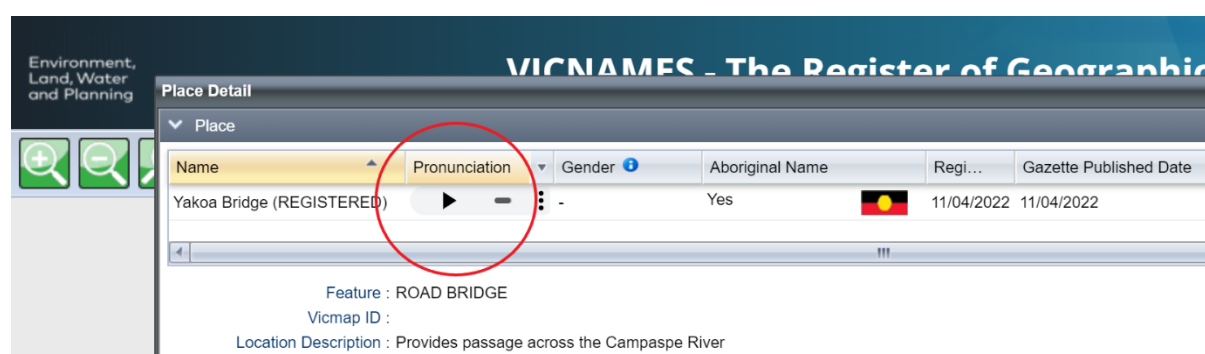


Image shows one of ten thousand sound files available in the Victorian Register of Geographic Names – VICNAMES<sup>10</sup>.

Whilst a subset of data is provided to the Composite Gazetteer of Australia, for more granular information requests are directed to PNWG members. For example, a particular focus for some members is the diversity of names, historically many places across Australia have been named after men. Including the collection, discoverability and sharing of data on gender variables will ensure improve data reporting.

### Conclusion

Australia continues to flourish under a devolved process with no formal national naming authority. Whilst it can take time to reach national consensus, PNWG members continue to effectively manage their jurisdiction and ensure place names standardisation and work collaboratively to support standardisation at a national level. This approach allows observers to support the PNWG such as First Languages Australia and the Australian Placenames Survey. The current processes and PNWG membership ensure an approach that works.

We have much to be proud of with the work over the past two years and PNWG and ICSM look forward to sharing knowledge and challenges and gaining insights into geographical naming practices around the world.

The collaborative approach ensures we can continue to preserve our cultural history and protect our communities through the standardisation of geographical place names.

### Points for Discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to:

- (a) Express its views on the report and discuss the work undertaken in Australia.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.land.vic.gov.au/place-naming/commemorative-place-naming/our-equal-places-program>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://maps.land.vic.gov.au/lasi/VicnamesUI.jsp>



