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English

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**United Nations Group of Experts On  
Geographical Names  
2025 session**

New York, 28 April – 2 May 2025

**Item 8 (b) of the provisional agenda \***

**Culture, heritage and language recognition: Indigenous, minority  
and regional languages and multilingual issues**

**Amplifying First Nations languages in Australia**

Submitted by Australia \*\*

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\*\* Prepared by Mr Rafe Benli, Australia, Place Names Working Group, Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping and Ms Carolyn Barker, First Languages Australia.

This paper draws extensively on First Languages Australia's forthcoming discussion paper: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Place names (<https://www.firstlanguages.org.au/nangun-wruk>) and from presentations to the Place Names Working Group annual meeting (October 2024).

## Background

The continent, now known as Australia, is home to many hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations, each with distinct language and lore, stipulating what knowledge should be shared with which people, as well as under what conditions. Such lore includes policies that guide the use of place names. The process of colonisation went a long way towards erasing all signs of the existing nations, with the renaming of this continent an active and ongoing colonial effort. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are working to maintain and restore traditional place names through community-led activities such as land and sea management, language, art, dance, story and tourism. In this context, First Languages Australia (FLA) represents the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language custodians seeking public and official recognition of Country<sup>1</sup> via geographical names.

FLA is the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language centres and programs. The organisation is overseen by its Directors and Management Committee, all of whom are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people with expertise in a particular portfolio of language work. To date, FLA has had great success in the development and establishment of highly productive partnerships which see collaborating organisations dedicate internal resources to activities that support the needs of local language centres and communities.

The Place Names Working Group (PNWG) coordinates geographical-naming activities across Australia and New Zealand. The role of the PNWG is to work towards the consistent use of geographical names, to ensure they meet the requirements of all stakeholders, including the public, government agencies and emergency services. Each of the Australian states and territories is a member. Since 2017, FLA and the PNWG have been exploring ways to enable language custodians' control over traditional geographical names in government databases.

We know that Indigenous geographical-name information in government databases can be improved, but not without significant community collaboration. FLA and PNWG members are also aware that government public consultation requirements around naming and dual naming can act against Indigenous interests. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represent 3.3% of the current Australian population<sup>2,3</sup>. In many regions, traditional owners are a smaller percentage. Hence, the reinstatement of geographical names involves prioritising the voices of custodians who are likely to be a minority of the contemporary population of their Country.

## The current situation

In Australia, official geographic names often include the names of explorers, settlers and their families (e.g., Cooktown, Lake Macquarie); their homelands (e.g., New South Wales, Newcastle); and historical figures from colonising nation/s (e.g., Darwin, Tom Price, Adelaide and Victoria). Sometimes the introduced names may be considered dull and hold little connection to anything (e.g., Northern Territory, Peak Hill, Townsville). Sometimes they are offensive (e.g., Black Gin Creek, Murdering Creek, Blacks Camp Reserve) or reflect traumatic events in the frontier wars which are otherwise unacknowledged (e.g., The Leap, Surprise Creek, Skull Springs, Victory Hill, Suicide Creek). Other times, they describe

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<sup>1</sup> In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people sometimes use the word Country to refer to the lands to which they have ancestral connection.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Estimates and Projections, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2006 - 2031*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-and-projections-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release> (accessed 2022-10-14).

<sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *Profile of Indigenous Australians*. Australia's welfare 2021. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/profile-of-indigenous-australians> (accessed 2022-10-14).

the landscape through the settlers' eyes (e.g., Blue Mountains, Lightning Ridge). There are also contemporary names that derive from Aboriginal and Torres Strait languages as interpreted by settlers, for example, Ballarat<sup>4</sup> and Maroochydore<sup>5</sup>. It is estimated that a quarter of official geographic names have an Indigenous origin. These tend to be attached to the smaller rivers and less significant topographical features that were less the subject of renaming by settlers. However, until recently, official geographic name systems have relied solely on written records.

Across Australia, there are now two overlapping networks of geographical names: the traditional and the introduced. For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the reinstatement of traditional geographical names are a step towards shared, meaningful connection to local language, lore, culture and heritage. Activities to support amplification of First Nations languages intend to reframe how Indigenous communities and governments work together to reinstate geographical names across Australia

We know that geographical names articulate and foster connection to Country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and can also develop and strengthen connection to place and understanding of place for non-Indigenous members of the Australian community. To date, community interactions with geographical-name authorities about the official recognition of traditional names have often been fraught. Despite this, communities remain ready to work with government name authorities through custodian-led processes.

### **Unofficial change**

In some regions, collaborations between language custodians, local authorities and the media are seeing an increase in the use of traditional names independently of the official naming process. As public awareness increases, FLA hopes that appreciation of community-led initiatives will also increase. In most states and territories, public servants within state naming authorities are keen to support community efforts in geographical naming by establishing ways to improve the material in their databases. However, governments can struggle with protocols, relationships or gaining funds required to undertake meaningful engagement.

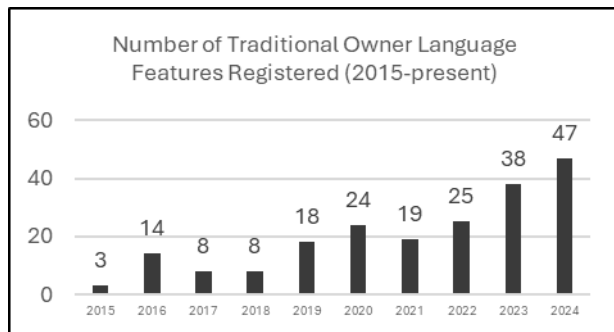
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<sup>4</sup> *There Are Four 'A's in Ballarat*; ABC, 2017. <https://iview.abc.net.au/video/RA1908H001S00> (accessed 2022-02-18).

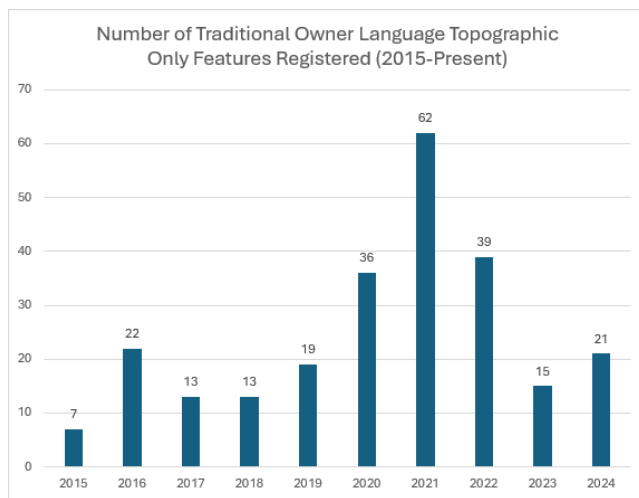
<sup>5</sup> *How the Black Swan Gave Maroochydore Its Name*; ABC, 2018. <https://iview.abc.net.au/video/RA1908H018S00> (accessed 2022-02-18)

## What does the data show

We know many of our colleagues across Australia are working diligently to increase the use of Indigenous languages. We can see this in the graphs provided below which show the increase of indigenous geographical names across three jurisdictions in Australia.

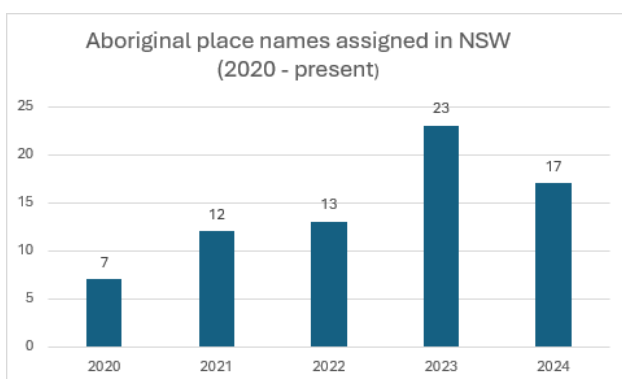


*Victoria in 2024 saw 47 geographical names.*



*Western Australia in 2024 saw 24 geographical names.*

It is interesting to note the trend in the use of geographical names. Policies and processes continue to be developed to support the use of indigenous languages across Australia. Whilst some years the numbers are lower, the general trend is seeing a



positive increase in the use of language.

*New South Wales in 2024 saw 17 geographical names.*

## Case studies across Australia

### Western Australia

Landgate (as the State's naming authority) has been working with Traditional Owners on restoring language.

Place Names Maali (Noongar for Swan) is a reconciliation, truth telling and Aboriginal language revival project delivered in partnership with Landgate and the City of Swan. This project, facilitated by Dr Len Collard from Moodjar, was designed to decode Noongar Place names in the City of Swan area to be placed on an interactive place names map.

Landgate completed five decoding workshops with their Maali miy an Advisory Group made up of local Elders, Traditional Owners and representatives from the Whadjuk Aboriginal Corporation Culture Advice Committee. The group were able to uncover and decode 18 Noongar placenames. The project was launched on 1 October by the Minister for Lands, Hon John Carey MLA.

The Aboriginal Place Names map, storymap and associated video has been well received by stakeholders, including Local Government Authorities who would be interested in providing Aboriginal place names and meanings for inclusion on the map, if it was extended to cover the State.

Link to map:  
<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/f0e3fe8ed17946d8a76616ecb699e23d/?draft=true>

Link to video:  
<https://youtu.be/OXUDIXJl6-k>

### Australian Capital Territory (ACT) – Maliyan Park

Maliyan Park, in the division (locality) of Watson was officially named in November 2023 and opened in August 2024. In the language of the Ngunnawal people, traditional custodians of the ACT, the word Maliyan has a meaning of Wedge-tailed Eagle in the English language. Ngunnawal Elders and members of

the Winanggaay Ngunnawal Language Aboriginal Corporation offered the word Maliyan for the park. The Ngunnawal people were closely engaged in other aspects of the project, including artwork and design.



### Northern Territory (NT)– Wulgularr and Nitjpurru

In July 2024, following requests from Traditional Owners and extensive community consultation, the Minister approved the renaming of two Aboriginal community localities. Beswick, believed to have been named in honour of South Australian pastoralist James Beswick, was renamed **Wulgularr** (pronounced woo · gah · larr) in recognition of the traditional Jawoyn name for the area where the present community is situated. Pigeon Hole, a former outstation of the Victoria River Downs pastoral station, was renamed **Nitjpurru** (pronounced nit · poo · rroo) after the local Bilinarra language name for the billabong just north of the present community.

The NT's place naming committee vision is that 'Place names honour the diverse history and culture of the Northern Territory and its people'. Key consideration is given to prioritising Aboriginal place naming in any naming request. Proposed place names that are not Aboriginal names must nonetheless adhere to the Committee's precept 'to record the history and stories of the Northern Territory and to commemorate people who have contributed to its development, and supported its communities'.

### Great Barrier Marine Park Reef Authority / Queensland

The Great Barrier Reef is of international significance as it is one of the natural wonders of the world. It was

inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1981 for its unique natural attributes and enormous scientific and environmental importance.

There is heightened interest regarding the Traditional Owner initiatives within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park due to increased funding and indigenous recruitment opportunities.

Work continues with the Indigenous Partnership representatives in developing Traditional Use of Marine Resources Agreements (TUMRA) within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Areas are defined in consultation with Traditional Owners and maps, boundary descriptions and area statements are produced, resulting in joint accreditation of the particular area, between the GBRMPA and the State. Maps are often produced, depicting Traditional Place Names.

In June 2023 the Honourable Scott Stewart MP, Minister for Resources and Critical Minerals, announced the renaming of Fraser Island to K'gari. This decision was the culmination of two years of collaboration with the recognised traditional owners, government entities and the community.

The K'gari proposal involved the largest consultation process ever undertaken for a place naming suggestion in Queensland, with nearly 6000 submissions. K'gari is the traditional name of the Island. For the Butchulla People, the name K'gari comes from the creation story which describes the formation of their traditional homelands.

### New South Wales (NSW) Aboriginal place naming resources

In March 2024 NSW's Geographic Names Board (GNB) published the NSW Dual Names Map<sup>6</sup> on its website<sup>7</sup>. A short video promoting place naming as a way of reawakening and preserving Aboriginal languages has recently been produced by the GNB and is available on the website.

<sup>6</sup><https://portal.spatial.nsw.gov.au/portal/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=2633e8341ff94d1b928551ca3ddd7462>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nsw.gov.au/about-nsw/place-naming/aboriginal-names/dual>





You can view the video here:  
<https://vimeo.com/918139642/086ec9d983>

The video is also being broadcast on (SBS) NITV from Monday, 1st July and will continue to run as an interstitial between shows for the next three years.

### Victorian initiatives

Our language matters workshops continue to be held, with 10 so far delivered across the state. The workshops offer the opportunity to contact naming authorities, such as municipal councils, government departments and agencies and Land Surveyors with Traditional Owners. The workshops explain the importance of Traditional Owners languages and their use, the rules around naming and develop specific processes and case studies to ensure language can be applied to geographical places. The workshops are recorded using a live scribe – drawings below undertaken by Dayna Hayman.

#### Graphic Recording



This artwork, drawn live on the day, captures the key insight from the presentations and discussions. Created by Dayna Hayman.

OFFICIAL-Sensitive



### Indigenous Mapping Workshop (IMW) – Melbourne

In 2019 Geographic Names Victoria (GNV) become a major sponsor for IMW – due to COVID a face-to-face event never took place in Melbourne, rather it pivoted to a wholly online experience. Finally in 2023 the face-to-face event occurred which saw over 120 Traditional Owners from across the country attend the 3 day event in Melbourne to discuss mapping culture, including language and geographic names using licensed and open source software. The event was delivered in partnership with Google, NASA and Winyama.

The event will be hosted in other states over the next few years.



Image shows attendees at IMW Melbourne.

### Larni Barramal Yaluk – removing the derogatory name of Jim Crow Creek



In May 2023 the name Larni Barramal Yaluk was announced, with an on-Country ceremony held in July 2023. The ceremony was attended by about 50 people, many were from the Djarra Aboriginal Land Corporation.

The name means place of the emu nest. Referring to the shape of the adjoining Mount Franklin.

The entire process was over a period of almost 10 years and involved the community, academia, local governments and the Geographic Place Naming Advisory Panel.

The formal name change process took more than two years and included an independent appeal process. The consultation was undertaken across two local areas with hundreds of stakeholders engaged and participating in the voting and comment stages.

**Addressing offensive names**

The PNWG is aware of derogatory and offensive names still sit within the landscape across the continent. Many PNWG 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.

Colleagues in Queensland undertook a state-wide, whole-of-government audit of offensive place names in databases in July 2023. A shortlist of 41 offensive place names was identified for geographical features, such as creeks and hills, that are in remote locations and not critical for public safety or addressing. Views were sought from relevant local and State government agencies and Registered Native Title Bodies Corporate (RNTBCs) about the removal of the 41 offensive place names.

In general, there has been support from stakeholders for the removal of these priority offensive place names. Due to feedback received one name will be dealt with through another process. These names will be progressed to the Minister for consideration for removal.

**Call to action**

Language custodians are obligated to maintain their connection to Country. One small step in regaining control is ensuring that government geographic-name registers accurately represent Country. Geographical-name mapping across language regions occurs in diverse ways depending on the needs of, and opportunities available to, each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nation. Much of the significant work in this space has occurred through land management, cultural heritage, language, art, media and education activities the results of which are currently held in archives, community and otherwise. In some instances, this information has been published in books, maps, paintings and other resources.



State and territory naming authorities must provide assurance that the wishes of custodians will be heard and respected before they begin the process of community collaboration. FLA sees the establishment of government protocols that prioritise Indigenous authority as key to building the trust required for community collaboration. Creating and enacting specific protocols that ensure that the data approved through community processes is added to and prioritised in government databases will have far-reaching benefits for all Australians.

These include:

- improvement of the government data
- provision of points of contact between government agencies and custodian authorities
- publically accessible register of the custodians of each region.



FLA echoes calls made by Indigenous peoples internationally<sup>8</sup> to ensure that government structures at all levels are acting to:

- empower Indigenous authorities to enact policies and processes that appropriately recognise traditional geographical names
- recognise the fundamental connection between peoples, language and land by including traditional geographical name initiatives as national, state, territory and local government priorities
- work with local Indigenous authorities to reinstate the original geographical names and respect the authority of custodian governance structures in this regard
- provide funds to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance structures to undertake geographical-name activities.

The PNWG supports the prioritise highlighted by FLA and Indigenous peoples internationally. It is noted that supporting the use of Traditional Owner languages complies with UNGEGN and its predecessor's resolutions, namely:

- UNGEGN Resolution V/22 Aboriginal/ native geographical names
- UNGEGN Resolution VIII/1 Promotion of minority group and indigenous geographical names
- UNGEGN Resolution IX/5 Promotion of the recording and use of indigenous minority and regional language group geographical names

## Conclusion

The importance of the reinstatement of traditional geographic names has long been asserted by custodians and was recognised by the Commonwealth of Australia as the second recommendation of the parliamentary report on language learning in Indigenous communities<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, state and territory naming authorities recognise that we need to support public expectations for the provision of accessible and accurate Indigenous geographic-name data.

The PNWG and FLA will continue to foster a strong working relationship to identify each other's long term aims and opportunities for collaboration. PNWG will work with FLA and communities to ensure Traditional geographical names are appropriately shared and the sovereignty of the data is clear.

Both FLA and the PNWG want to increase the public's awareness of the importance of Australia's first languages, noting that wholesale policy change is unlikely without significant public support. Our collaboration has resulted in the successful engagement with state and territory governments naming authorities, who will support community efforts to reinstate traditional geographic-naming.

Noting the work being undertaken in Australia and around the world in support of the United Nations Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022 – 2032 (the Decade), Australia recommends that UNGEGN has an ongoing agenda item for Countries to report on their work to support the Decade, including the number of geographic places named and collaboration activities to encourage the use of Indigenous languages.

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<sup>8</sup> Gray, C.; Rück, D. Reclaiming Indigenous Place Names, 2019. <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2019/10/08/reclaiming-indigenous-place-names/> .

<sup>9</sup> Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs. *Our Land Our Languages: Language Learning in Indigenous Communities*; Parliament of the commonwealth of Australia: Canberra, 2012.

An ongoing agenda item would sit well under Agenda item 8b Culture, heritage and language recognition, indigenous, minority and regional languages and multilingual issues. Explicitly mentioning the Decade would give further credence to an important UN initiative.