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

New York, 28 April – 2 May 2025

Item 8 (a) of the provisional agenda \*

**Culture, heritage and language recognition: Geographical names  
as culture, heritage and identity**

## **Mapping changes to geographical names over time in Canada**

Submitted by Canada\*\*

### **Summary:**

Since 1897, the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) has worked to establish standards and practices for the naming of Canada's places and features. Naming authorities of the GNBC are responsible for maintaining over 350,000 official place names across Canada's vast geography. These names are used on official government maps and documents, and by various other users in a range of applications. Geographical names are coordinated by federal, provincial, and territorial naming authorities according to where the place or geographical feature is located.

As the national coordinating body for Canada's geographical names, the GNBC works to make information about these names and their stories available to a wide range of audiences. To this end, the GNBC has released three interactive maps on themes of interest over the past eight years. The interactive maps highlight geographical names that: commemorate the service of Canadians who have served in armed conflicts, celebrate the contributions of women in Canada, and highlight the roots of many Canadian place names in Indigenous languages and cultures.

Following an exploration of ongoing periodic changes to official names in Canada, particularly related to Indigenous geographical names and derogatory geographical names, Natural Resources Canada (NRCan) worked with GNBC naming authorities to develop a new interactive map to depict and categorize a sample of these changes. The new map explores the evolution and treatment of geographical names over the last 100 years in Canada, selecting a sample of approximately 350 names as a basis. The process of analyzing historical records for the map also revealed possible factors that may contribute to the evolution of geographical names in Canada and other key insights. The decision to change the official name of a place, location or feature in Canada is not taken lightly or without significant research and consideration regarding the impact of the change. These requests are not common, and require a strong, supported rationale. The map is planned to be launched at the International Cartographic Conference in Vancouver, Canada, August 16-22, 2025.

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\* GEGN.2/2025/1.

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## Mapping changes to geographical names over time in Canada

### A new addition to the GNBC's interactive map series

The Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) is Canada's national coordinating body for place names. The GNBC, established for over 120 years, works through federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities to set principles, policies and procedures for the naming of geographic features and locations in Canada. As a national coordinating body, the GNBC also aims to support information sharing and collaboration on topics of interest with regards to the national standardization of geographical names.

The GNBC is supported by a Secretariat provided by Natural Resources Canada (NRCan), a department of the Government of Canada. NRCan also manages the Canadian Geographical Names Database (CGNDB) on behalf of the GNBC, providing a national repository for official geographical names approved by federal, provincial, and territorial naming authorities.

NRCan in collaboration with the GNBC has previously released three interactive maps to bring awareness to the historical and cultural significance of Canada's geographical names. Interactive maps are important tools for engaging with a wide range of audiences, ages, and communities, and can be more accessible than other types of cartographic products.

In 2018, the GNBC released an interactive map entitled *Canada's Commemorative Map*<sup>1</sup>, showcasing geographical names that commemorate Canada's participation in armed conflicts at home and abroad. In 2019 on National Indigenous Peoples Day, the GNBC released an interactive map recognizing official place names in Canada that originate from Indigenous languages and dialects. The map, *Stories from the Land: Indigenous Place Names in Canada*<sup>2</sup>, highlights the important role of geographical names in recognizing, preserving and strengthening Indigenous languages and cultures through a selection of over 780 geographical places named in over 65 Indigenous languages or dialects. And, in 2021, the GNBC released an interactive map entitled *Recognizing Women with Canadian Place Names*<sup>3</sup>, which highlights nearly 500 geographical locations across Canada named after women.

The concept for a new map in this series was first considered by the GNBC in 2023. The primary driver was to investigate the issue of derogatory geographical names in Canada, and how naming authorities have worked to address offensive names at different points throughout Canada's history. As with language and terminology, the names of geographical features evolve over time. When naming authorities are made aware of the inappropriateness or derogatory nature of certain place names, they address the issue through policies and procedures specific to the jurisdiction. Work continues in Canada to address names considered as derogatory in official names databases, in partnership with relevant authorities, communities and experts.

Since 2023, the concept for the map has evolved and developed into an interactive map that documents and showcases a curated selection of official geographical names across Canada that have evolved over time due to various reasons. Although changes to official names for geographic features such as communities, mountains, islands, lakes and rivers are not a common occurrence, examples of names that have evolved or changed over time are found in oral histories, historical maps and official records dating back over a century.

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<sup>1</sup> [Canada's Commemorative Map](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Stories from the Land: Indigenous Place Names in Canada](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Recognizing Women with Canadian Place Names](#)

Changes to official geographical names in Canada, as represented on authoritative government maps and documents, are not taken lightly, and undergo significant research and consideration by naming authorities to assess their potential impact. They are typically only implemented following consultation with local communities, stakeholders and partners, supported by a strong rationale, and vetted and approved through formal processes. Changes are considered by the appropriate GNBC federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities in accordance with established principles and procedures<sup>4</sup>.

Understanding the evolution of names over time is important for effective geographical names management in Canada. Standardized official place names, and their geographic location and extent, are critical for providing services related to emergency response, communications and navigation systems. The process of amending an official geographical name includes updating records in information management systems. Names approved by the naming authorities of the GNBC are recorded in jurisdictional databases and the CGNDB. The CGNDB stores geographical name attributes including location, decision dates, and previously official names to preserve historical context. Currently, official names are also publicly available and used by government and industry in a range of current Canadian base maps that support various applications such as alerts for severe weather, flooding and wildfire events, among others.

### **Development process**

In preparation for the development of the interactive map, considerable work was done to query the CGNDB and jurisdictional databases to identify historic changes over time to update official names within Canada's 13 provincial and territorial naming jurisdictions and on federal lands. This resulted in the identification of approximately 350 examples over the last 110 years, with geographical locations spanning Canada's landmass.

The examples were compiled into an extensive spreadsheet with metadata for each point location, including the current and former names, date of name change, latitude-longitude coordinate, and type of geographical feature. A short narrative was drafted for each name based on information found in the CGNDB and GNBC records. An overarching narrative was developed to explain to the audience the authority and process for geographical names coordination in Canada. This information was amalgamated into an interactive web map depicting the points on an official base map provided by NRCan and using interactive 'pop-up' boxes for narratives.

Preliminary analysis of the historical records revealed several possible factors that may contribute to the evolution of geographical names in Canada, including linguistic shifts, orthographic revisions, evolving societal attitudes, changes in physical geographical features, and the formal adoption or reinstatement of Indigenous place names.

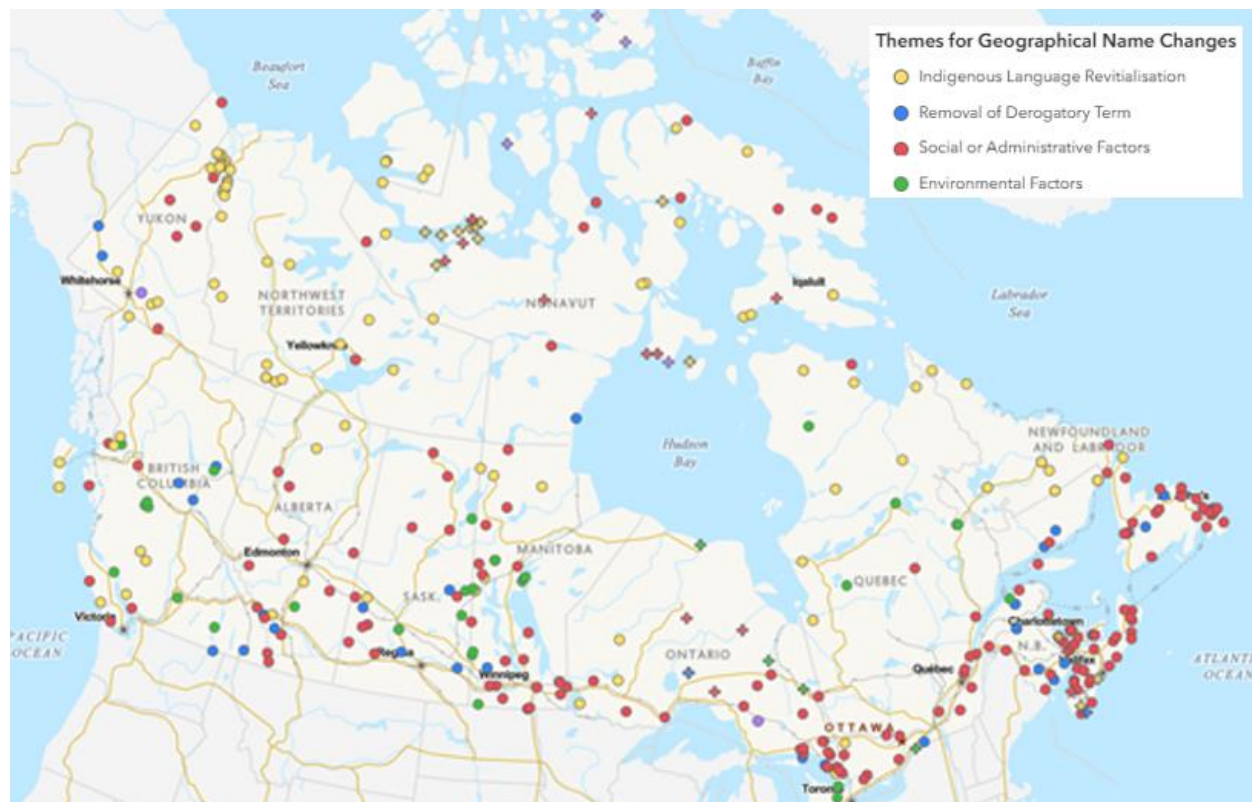
Further analysis identified four primary drivers of toponymic change in Canada: (1) the restoration of Indigenous geographical names, (2) taking action on derogatory terminology, (3) administrative changes, such as the amalgamation of communities and shifts in naming conventions, and (4) environmental factors resulting in physical alterations to geographic features. The identification of these four drivers allowed classification of the names into four corresponding layers for creating the interactive map.

Although these four broad drivers were identified for why geographical names have changed in Canada over time, analysis of the 350 examples demonstrated that this process is not always so

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<sup>4</sup> [Principles and procedures](#)

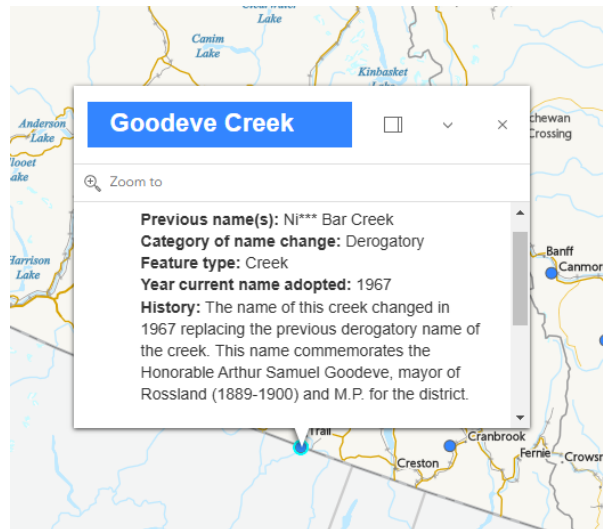
straightforward or clear. In developing this map, several insights emerged, and there is still much to learn.



*Screenshot example of the interactive map showing a selection of changes to official place names in Canada, taken 6 March, 2025*

### Examples and insights for geographical name changes in Canada

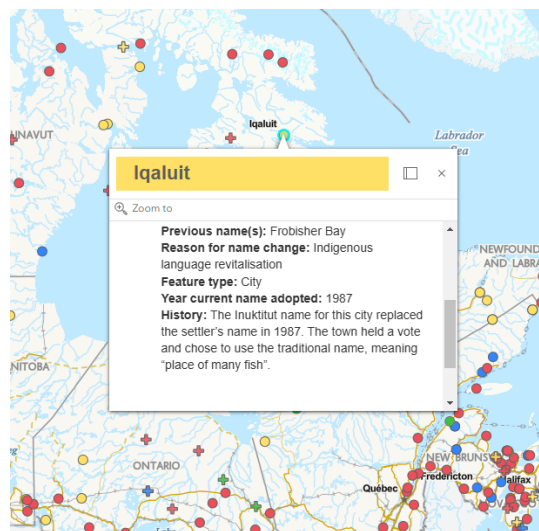
Historically, geographical naming practices may have used terminology that was once considered acceptable but is now offensive. Place naming authorities across Canada have been working for many years to rescind and change names that are considered discriminatory. There are multiple examples of these changes over several decades, including a creek in British Columbia that was originally assigned a derogatory term that was renamed to **Goodeve Creek** in 1967. More recently, in 2023, following local consultations in Nova Scotia, a community was renamed to **Eel Bay**, as the former name was deemed derogatory.



*Screenshot example of Goodeve Creek, British Columbia, on the interactive map, taken 6 March, 2025*

Naming authorities across Canada are also working to recognize and restore geographic names to reflect the rich cultures, histories, and languages of Indigenous Peoples. There are various well-known examples of these changes, including:

- In 1987, the community of **Frobisher Bay** in the former Northwest Territories was officially renamed **Iqaluit**, reverting to its original name in the Inuktitut language meaning “the place of many fish.”
- In 1993, the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement between the Inuit people and Canada initiated the division of the Northwest Territories to establish the new territory of **Nunavut**, meaning “our land” in the Inuktitut language.
- In 2010, the **Queen Charlotte Islands** off the coast of British Columbia were renamed **Haida Gwaii**, meaning "Islands of the people" in the Haida language.



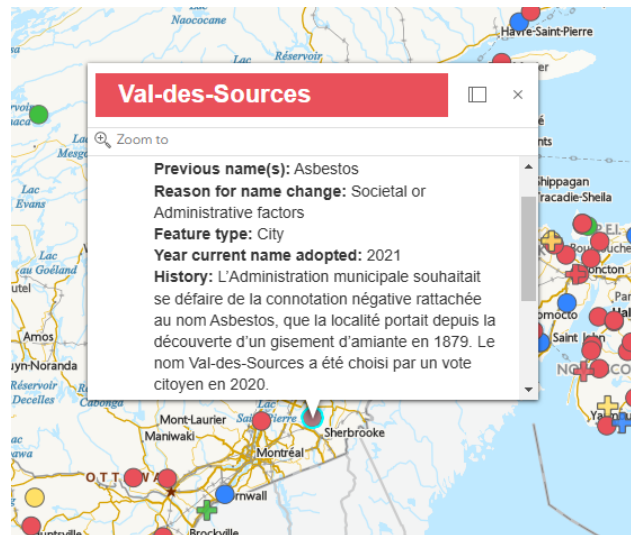
*Screenshot example of Iqaluit, Nunavut, on the interactive map, taken 6 March, 2025*

Some updates are a result of changing orthographies. For example, the spelling of a name of a community in the Northwest Territories was corrected from **Detah** to **Dettah** in 2020, reflecting the

spelling used by the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. The meaning of the name is "burnt point" in the T'èzehdaà- Wìlìhdeh language.

Administrative processes and policies, including community amalgamations, as well as spelling errors can also result in requests for amended or new feature or location names. For example, several mountains in Canada are named to commemorate individuals. In these cases, the generic "mount" usually precedes the name of the person. Adoption of this practice resulted in the changes of *Roop Mountain* in the Yukon to *Mount Roop* and *Balcarres Mountain* in Alberta to *Mount Balcarres*.

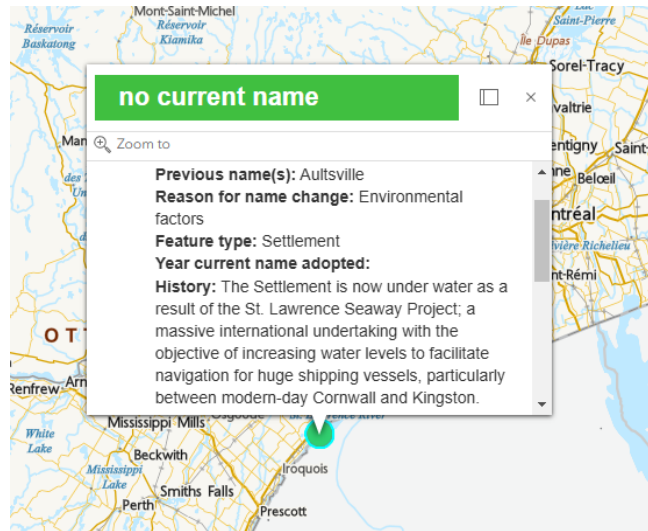
As changing a geographical name for a populated place can create disruption in a community, it is important that the process is inclusive, transparent, and not undertaken without significant justification and consultation with implicated parties. Historically in Canada, local referendums have been used to establish new official names through democratic processes. For instance, in 2021, the name of the town of *Asbestos*, Québec was changed to *Val-des-Sources* via a municipal referendum. The change of the town's name was to remove association with the toxic mineral formally mined in the area.



*Screenshot example of Val-des-Sources, Québec, on the interactive map, taken 6 March, 2025*

Other geographical names have been impacted by environmental factors that change the landscape. For example, in 1958, environmental changes due to the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway resulted in permanent flooding of the community of *Aultsville*, Ontario, and the rescinding of the name of the town.





*Screenshot example of Aultsville, Ontario, on the interactive map, taken 6 March, 2025*

Though the above examples can be attributed to one of the identified drivers (derogatory names; Indigenous place names; administrative changes; environmental changes), some examples can cross, or appear to cross, drivers. For example, in 2020, **Blackman Lake** in Manitoba was renamed to **Herbert Blackman Lake** in order to clarify the commemorative nature of the lake's name. Corporal Herbert Henry Blackman served during the First World War in the 43rd Canadian Infantry Battalion and died 8 October 1916. The name was originally flagged as being potentially derogatory, and was eventually modified to include Corporal Blackman's first name for administrative reasons.

Understanding the evolution of geographical names over time is not always simple. Many factors can influence a change, and it can be challenging to draw broader conclusions that apply to all regions or in all cases. Most examples are highly dependent on context and reflect the realities of the local communities. Change requests are not always unanimously adopted, and no change is taken without significant justification and consultation. Despite this, official geographical names have changed across all regions in Canada over the last hundred years, and they continue to evolve today.

Naming jurisdictions in Canada can learn from one another and from these experiences in managing geographical names over time, both its challenges and opportunities. It is important for the GNBC naming authorities to remain flexible and current with societal trends. For example, changes have been made to both *Canada's Commemorative Map*<sup>5</sup> and the *Stories from the Land: Indigenous Place Names in Canada*<sup>6</sup> since their publication, along with the online CGNDB which is refreshed weekly, to reflect the latest, most up-to-date information.

## Conclusion

NRCan, in collaboration with the naming authorities of the GNBC, has prepared a new interactive map that showcases a selection of interesting changes to place names across Canada over approximately 100 years. Combining interactive mapping with histories and narratives, the map explores the drivers behind these cases, such as the restoration of Indigenous names and the reassessment of terms once viewed as acceptable but now recognized as harmful or discriminatory.

<sup>5</sup> [Canada's Commemorative Map](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Stories from the Land: Indigenous Place Names in Canada](#)

Official place names may change periodically over time through the jurisdictional processes established by Canada's naming authorities. Changes typically involve research, review of impacts, and consultation with relevant stakeholders, and follow approval processes in place in each jurisdiction. This ongoing evolution reflects Canada's broader commitment to honouring its diverse cultural heritage and acknowledging the complexities of its history. The map not only helps educate the public about the historical and cultural significance of place names but also sheds light on the formal processes in place to update them.

Understanding the stories behind place names remains an important part of Canada's journey toward reflection and growth. The GNBC's interactive maps foster this understanding, helping us connect more deeply with the cultural and historical narratives embedded in the names of our landscapes.

**Key Links:**

1. *Canada's Commemorative Map* (2021) Natural Resources Canada, Geographical Names Board of Canada Secretariat. Available at: <https://canada.ca/commemorative-map/>
2. *Canadian Geographical Names Database* (2025) Natural Resources Canada, Geographical Names Board of Canada Secretariat. Available at: <https://geonames.nrcan.gc.ca/search-place-names/search> (accessed January 27, 2025).
3. *Recognizing Women with Canadian Place Names* (2021) Natural Resources Canada, Geographical Names Board of Canada Secretariat. Available at: <https://canada.ca/womens-map/>
4. *Stories from the Land* (2022) Natural Resources Canada, Geographical Names Board of Canada Secretariat. Available at: <https://canada.ca/Indigenous-placenames/>