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English

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**United Nations Group of Experts on  
Geographical Names  
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Item 5 (b) of the provisional agenda \*

**Technical expertise: Geographical names data management**

**Updating the International Organization for Standardization  
639 standard to record the language of origin for Indigenous  
geographical names in Canada**

Submitted by Canada\*\*

**Summary:**

An estimated 30,000 official geographical names in Canada have origins in multiple Indigenous languages and cultures. Efforts by the naming authorities of the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) are ongoing to research, document, restore and promote traditional names that reflect Indigenous heritage. Special effort is paid to accurately record the Indigenous language of origin for these names.

Natural Resources Canada (NRCan) maintains the Canadian Geographical Names Database (CGNDB) on behalf of the GNBC. The database uses the ISO 639-3 standard to record the Indigenous language of origin for geographical names. Work to date by the GNBC has identified the language of origin for over 24,000 place names across Canada, in over 75 Indigenous languages.

ISO 639-3 is a standardized nomenclature used to classify and represent all known human languages, including living, extinct, historic or constructed languages. There are gaps and dated terminology in the ISO 639-3 standard for certain Indigenous languages in Canada; the current standard does not accurately represent the broad diversity of Indigenous languages, or the modern terms used to name them. The GNBC Secretariat worked with a linguist with expertise in Indigenous languages to consult with Elders, knowledge keepers, fluent speakers, and experts to prepare amendments and update submissions to ISO 639-3. The goal of this work is to ensure that geographical names with roots in those languages are respectfully and accurately represented in Canada and abroad.

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\* GEGN.2/2025/1.

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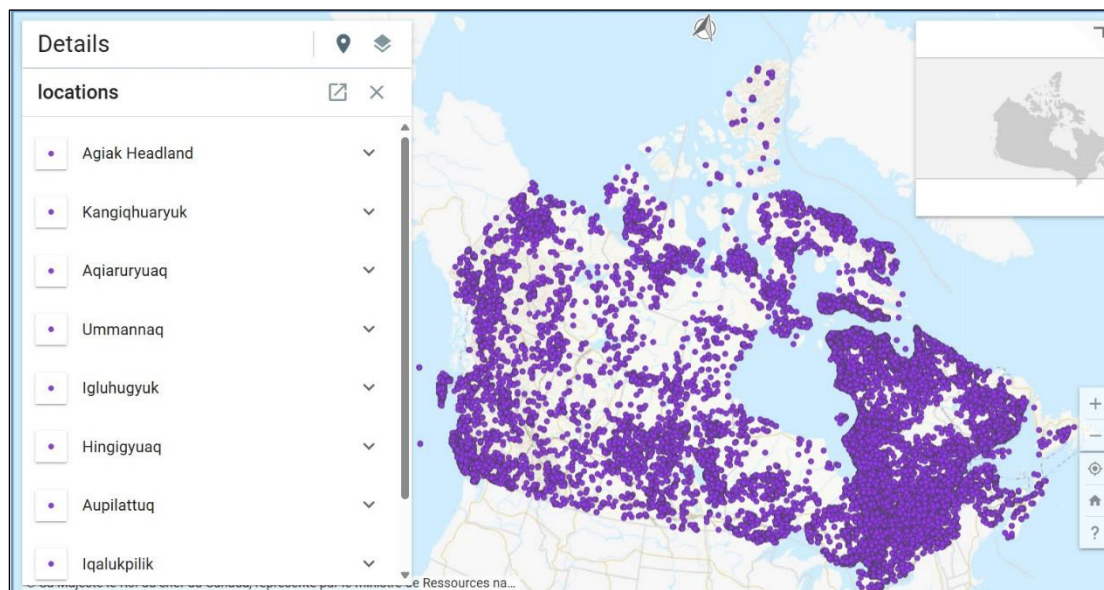
## Updating the International Organization for Standardization 639 standard to record the language of origin for Indigenous geographical names in Canada

### Indigenous Geographical Names in Canada

An estimated 30,000 official geographical names in Canada have roots in an Indigenous language or culture. As the national coordinating body for geographical names, the GNBC supports the restoration of Indigenous place names, helping reconnect geographical names to the land, culture and languages of Indigenous Peoples across Canada. The provincial, territorial and federal naming authorities of the GNBC work to research and document traditional names that preserve Indigenous heritage and languages, supported through community engagement and projects, research partnerships, and modern treaties and self-government agreements. To date, these efforts have helped identify the language of origin for more than 24,000 place names across Canada, in over 75 Indigenous languages.

In 2022, NRCan released the Indigenous Geographical Names dataset, which identifies official geographical names with origins in Indigenous languages and cultures. This dataset was extracted from the Canadian Geographical Names Database (CGNDB). The CGNDB is Canada's national database for official geographical names, maintained by NRCan on behalf of the GNBC, that consolidates geographical names from federal, provincial and territorial sources. The database contains core geospatial data for each geographical name, as well as the Indigenous language of origin where known, recorded using ISO 639-3 for standardization and data interoperability. The data are available to download as Open Data and through an interactive web mapping service.

*Screenshot, Indigenous Geographical Names dataset, taken 28 February*



2025<sup>1</sup>

In collaboration with GNBC members, NRCan has been researching, documenting and recording Indigenous languages of origin for geographical names in the CGNDB. The current language value field, known as the 'Indigenous Linguistic Classification List,' is a combination of the ISO 639-3 standardized codes with locally or regionally recommended Indigenous language names, also referred to as endonyms. While many of the newly approved Indigenous geographical names in the CGNDB

<sup>1</sup> [Indigenous Geographical Names Data - Natural Resources Canada](#)

are accompanied by accurate and up-to-date linguistic information provided by the appropriate naming authority, a considerable number of previously adopted Indigenous toponyms lack any information regarding their linguistic origin. The language of origin for many names has been identified retroactively by the GNBC Secretariat through review of historical GNBC naming records.

OGNDB ID	Geographical Name	ISO Language	Language	Generic Category	Latitude	Longitude	Province - Territory	Decision Date	Source
EHFPF	Lac Memphrémagog	abe	Abenaki Western	Water Feature	45.137955	-72.26776	Quebec	1968-12-05	Quebec-Commission de Toponymie
FEPUJ	Little Abitibi Provincial Park	alq	Algonquin	Administrative Area	49.5280556	-80.7686111	Ontario	1990-12-31	Ontario-Ministry of Natural Resources and Forest
FDKBT	Cayuga	cay	Cayuga	Populated Place	42.95073	-79.85623	Ontario	1974-04-01	Ontario-Ministry of Natural Resources and Forest
JDMZD	Ts'il'qot'in	clt	Ts'il'qot'in	Terrain Feature	51.3725	-123.863611	British Columbia	2019-03-11	British Columbia-Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport
JCUYZ	Comox	coo	ʔayʔajuθəm (Comox)	Populated Place	49.672778	-124.927778	British Columbia	1982-01-15	British Columbia-Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport
GBPLY	Wapusk National Park of Canada	cre	Cree	Administrative Area	57.773889	-93.371389	Manitoba	2001-01-12	Parks Canada
LBKQZ	Behchokq	dgr	Tłtchq	Populated Place	62.8273	-116.0582	Northwest Territories	2005-06-30	NT - Education Culture Employment
LCBSL	Dajj Dhakhajj Ch'i	gwi	Gwich'in	Terrain Feature	68.147778	-133.716389	Northwest Territories	2014-05-30	NT - Education Culture Employment
JDIMK	Haida Gwaii	hai	Haida	Terrain Feature	53.25	-132.25	British Columbia	2010-06-03	British Columbia-Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport
JBFDQ	Port Coquitlam	hur	Halkomelem	Populated Place	49.261944	-122.780278	British Columbia	1996-02-11	British Columbia-Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport
OEBQA	Quunnguup Kangiqqua	ike	Inuktitut, Eastern Canadian	Water Feature	66.65	-87.033333	Nunavut	2013-04-25	NU-Department of Culture and Heritage
JALEW	Kootenay Lake	kut	Ktunaxa	Water Feature	49.7125	-116.883333	British Columbia	1924-03-31	British Columbia-Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport
EIONZ	Lac Caribou	mic	Mi'kmaw, Mi'gmau	Water Feature	48.594833	-72.795241	Quebec	1976-09-22	Quebec-Commission de Toponymie
ACVFN	Ashkashkuaikan-shipiss	moe	Innu	Water Feature	53.7195203	-60.5436625	Newfoundland and Labrador	2015-01-27	NL-Fisheries, Forestry and Agriculture
ENZVD	Pont des Adirondacks	moh	Kanien'kéha, Kanyen'kéha (Mohawk)	Constructed Feature	45.376688	-73.751019	Quebec	1989-06-20	Quebec-Commission de Toponymie
JADRA	Clayoquot Sound	nuk	Nuu-chah-nulth	Water Feature	49.233333	-126.044444	British Columbia	1924-03-31	British Columbia-Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport
FEZVL	Pukaskwa National Park of Canada	ojc	Ojibwe, Central	Administrative Area	48.25	-85.916667	Ontario	2001-01-12	Parks Canada
FDYMT	Nipissing	oij	Eastern Ojibwe, Nishnaabemwin	Administrative Area	46.0836	-79.51822	Ontario	1962-12-31	Ontario-Ministry of Natural Resources and Forest
GBDLN	Weechekeenayasi Point	ojs	Anishiniimowin, Anisninemowin (Ojibwe)	Terrain Feature	52.021944	-95.414722	Manitoba	1977-12-22	MB-Natural Resources and Northern Development
JAFUV	Kelowna	oka	ᑏsəlxcn, nsylxcn	Populated Place	49.888056	-119.495556	British Columbia	1994-07-13	British Columbia-Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport
FBNLE	Hiawatha	ono	Onondaga	Populated Place	44.1794444	-78.205	Ontario	1931-12-01	Ontario-Ministry of Natural Resources and Forest
EDLVS	Ottawa River	otw	Odawa	Water Feature	45.3410712	-73.9601886	Quebec	1983-11-23	Geographical Names Board of Canada
DANAG	Passamaquoddy Bay	pgm	Wolastoqey-Passamaquoddy	Water Feature	45.1	-66.983333	New Brunswick	1952-06-06	New Brunswick-Tourism, Culture and Heritage
LCCQC	Déjūne	scs	Dene Kádá, North Slavey	Populated Place	65.1888889	-123.4225	Northwest Territories	2018-02-27	NT - Education Culture Employment
JBGFI	Sechart Inlet	sec	she shashishalhem	Water Feature	49.629444	-123.762778	British Columbia	1951-04-05	British Columbia-Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport
JAFNW	Kamloops	shs	Secwepemctsin	Populated Place	50.675833	-120.339444	British Columbia	1927-06-07	British Columbia-Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport
JCVQI	Squamish	squ	Skwxwú7mesh snichim	Populated Place	49.698056	-123.155833	British Columbia	1972-09-12	British Columbia-Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport
JAKNF	Chilkoot Pass	tli	Tlingit	Terrain Feature	59.697222	-135.239167	British Columbia	1924-03-31	British Columbia-Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport
JBXHB	Kitimat River	tsi	Ts'msyen (Tsimshian)	Water Feature	54.010833	-128.662222	British Columbia	1953-04-02	British Columbia-Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport
KBBGP	Kalt'a Mán	ttm	Dän K'i, Northern Tutchone	Water Feature	62.5686111	-139.4247222	Yukon	2019-03-22	Yukon-Department of Tourism and Culture

*Sample extraction from the Indigenous Geographical Names dataset showing ISO 639-3 coding*

In recent years, GNBC members have increased their efforts to identify the language of origin for Indigenous geographical names. Meanwhile, Indigenous Nations and communities are in the process of reclaiming and revitalizing their languages, cultures and customary practices, including their ability to choose their preferred language names, spellings and geographical names.

cay-Cayuga
chh-Chinook
chn-Chinook jargon
chp-Déne Sųlíné, Chipewyan
ciw-Southwestern Ojibwe, Anishinaabemwin (Chippewa)
clt-Ts'il'qot'in
clm-Klallam
coo-ʔayʔajuθəm (Comox)
cre-Cree
crj-East Cree-Southern
crk-nēhiyawēwin, Plains Cree
crl-East Cree, Northern
crm-ililimowin, Moose Cree
crx-Dakelh, Carrier
csw-nēhinawēwin, Swampy Cree
cwd-nihithawiw, Woodland Cree
dak-Dakota

*Excerpt of ISO 639-3 Linguistic Classifications in the CGNDB***ISO 639-3 Updates**

ISO 639-3 is a standardized nomenclature used to classify and represent all known human languages, including living, extinct, historic or constructed languages. Currently, there are gaps and dated terminology in ISO 639-3 for Indigenous languages in Canada, and the standard does not accurately represent modern-day Indigenous community naming practices.

In 2023-2024, NRCan engaged an expert linguist, Dr. Heather Bliss of Simon Fraser University, to compile a comprehensive list of Indigenous languages in Canada, reflecting contemporary, community-based knowledge on language distinctions and preferred spellings. More than 90 languages were reviewed, and 61 Indigenous language experts were consulted to ensure that any changes to the way GNBC refers to Indigenous languages and geographical names were made in partnership with Indigenous Nations, Elders and knowledge keepers.

NRCan has adopted recommendations from Dr. Bliss's report in the CGNDB for implementing new ISO 639-3 languages codes to better represent Indigenous languages. A total of 102 ISO languages codes were recommended for use in the CGNDB, comprising nine macrolanguages and 93 individual languages. Following this work, Dr. Bliss prepared amendments and updates for submission to the ISO 639 Maintenance Agency to improve representation of Indigenous languages in Canada in the standard. Forty-one change requests have been submitted to the ISO 639-3 standard as a result of this work. Many of these requests are currently in the process of being reviewed by the Maintenance Agency and have yet to be formally included in the standard.

There are several challenges to updating the ISO 639-3 standard to better reflect Indigenous languages in Canada, including a lack of historical records, lack of distinction between languages and dialects, lack of consensus regarding appropriate language names and orthographies, length of time to update the standard, and the limitation to the Roman alphabet for the Indigenous language name. Despite these challenges, the CGNDB uses the ISO 639-3 standard to record the Indigenous language of origin for geographical names, and ongoing maintenance will support improved management and more accurate representation of Indigenous geographical names in Canada.

While the GNBC and affiliated organizations in Canada can adopt the recommendations of Indigenous Nations regardless of these changes being updated in the ISO 639-3 standard, there is an interest in the promotion of Indigenous geographical names that reflects a community-led approach. These efforts align with broader initiatives such as those under the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

**Conclusion**

Moving forward, NRCan and the GNBC will continue to collaborate to address any gaps and ensure that geographical names, and the diverse Indigenous languages reflected in those names, are respectfully and accurately represented in Canada. The GNBC recognizes that this work is on-going, as Indigenous Nations and communities continue their path towards language revitalization. Additional updates to the CGNDB Indigenous Linguistic Classification List and the ISO 639-3 may be required in future years.

**Related Links:**

- [Indigenous Geographical Names Data - Natural Resources Canada](#)
- [Geographical Names Board of Canada International Activities - Natural Resources Canada](#)

## **Points for discussion**

The Group of Experts is invited to:

- (1) Take note of the efforts made to support and promote Indigenous geographical names by recognizing their diverse languages of origin and seeking to utilize and update the relevant international standards for data management.
- (2) Express its views on the report and discuss different methods for supporting Indigenous geographical names and languages through standards.