

Forum on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage: Indigenous Geographical Names

UNGEGN Focus Group on Indigenous
Geographical Names, April 30, 2025

Steve Westley, Nicole Halseth
Geographical Names Board of Canada Secretariat



Land Acknowledgment



References: NYU MCC, LaGuardia Community College Library, Official Tribal and Nation websites, Kutztown University
Photo source: NYC tourism



Sources: CBC News 2021, Parks Canada 2024, Steve Westley 2024, An Indigenous Place Names Handbook: Sharing the Gwich'in Experience in Canada, 2023

Agenda

Welcome and Introductions (15 mins)	Mr Steve Westley, Executive Secretary, Geographical Names Board of Canada, Canada
Focus Group Overview (5 mins)	Ms Nicole Halseth, Senior Policy Analyst, Natural Resources Canada, Canada
Select Member State Experiences (20 mins): Good practices regarding Indigenous and minority language geographical names	<p>Presentation: Amplifying Indigenous Geographical Names – Mr Rafe Benli, Australia (10 mins)</p> <p>Presentation: Minority place-name standardization. A comparison of regulations and approaches in Europe. Mr Peter Jordan, Austria (10 mins)</p>
Discussion (30 mins)	All
Closing and next steps (5 mins)	Mr Steve Westley, Executive Secretary, Geographical Names Board of Canada, Canada

UNGEGN Focus Group on Indigenous Geographical Names

- Canada has led the focus group since 2021 to support:
 - international promotion and recognition of Indigenous place names
 - Member States in establishing, updating or improving their operational and standardization practices related to Indigenous place naming
- Coordination provided by Geographical Names Board of Canada Secretariat, Natural Resources Canada
- Operates under UNGEGN Working Group on Geographical Names as Cultural Heritage (WG GNCH)
- Focus is **primarily on Indigenous geographical names**

UN Alignment:

- Article 13 of the **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** specifically mentions place names
- 2022-2032 is the **International Decade of Indigenous Languages**
- Broader connections related to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (**UNPFII**), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (**UNESCO**)...



UNEGN Strategic Plan and Programme of Work 2021-2029

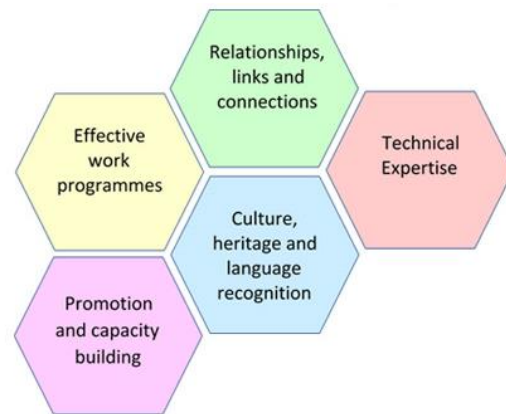
• Aims of the Strategic Plan:

- ...Recognize, respect and promote the value of geographical names **as significant elements of cultural heritage, language and identity**, including those of indigenous peoples and regional and minority groups;...

• Strategy 4: Culture, heritage and language recognition:

- ...Recognize that geographical names are a source of identity, encourage recognition of heritage and equality, **and support indigenous, regional and/or minority groups' language revitalization and preservation**;...

4-i-4	Share experience on cooperation with emergency services, tourism operators, brand consultants and other providers of services useful to society, e.g. plurilingual societies.	WG GNCH (Focus Groups 1 & 6).	Emergency services, tourism operators, brand consultants: initial examples for 2023; wider scope for 2025 and beyond.
4-ii-5	Share Member States' treatment of geographical names in indigenous , minority and regional language groups (policies and principles, field collection methodology, naming of both cultural and physical features, etc.).	WG GNCH (Focus Group 1), Member States.	Indigenous , minority and regional language group naming: ongoing, with specified goals and milestones proposed by 2023.



Current activities and looking ahead

Current activities:

- Prepare guiding documents for the operation of the group;
- Make existing UNGEGN materials related to Indigenous or minority language geographical names more widely accessible by posting them on a new UNGEGN webpage – complete;
- Review responses to the recent global survey for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL) related to Indigenous geographical names;
- Explore and discuss Member State experiences related to Indigenous and minority language geographical names, and associated challenges, opportunities and good practices.

Looking ahead: Explore further alignment with revitalized WG GNCH, others



Amplifying
Indigenous
Geographical
Names

Mr. Rafe Benli,
Australia



Minority place-name
standardization. A
comparison of
regulations and
approaches in Europe.

Mr. Peter Jordan,
Austria

Select Member State Experiences

Good practices regarding Indigenous and minority language geographical names



Q&A

Discussion and share your experiences

- How can geographical names support Indigenous language revitalization, for example, under the International Decade of Indigenous Languages?
- What is the role of oral methods for supporting Indigenous geographical names, e.g. in collection, audio recording, database management, and dissemination? How can Member States support this?
- What is the importance of ISO 639 for recording language of origin in Indigenous geographical names management? What are the experiences of Member States with this standard or others?
- What are some present and future barriers/challenges and opportunities with regards to Indigenous and minority language geographical names?



**Thank you /
Merci!**

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