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English

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

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Item 12 of the provisional agenda *

**Geographical names as culture, heritage and identity, including indigenous, minority
and regional languages and multilingual issues**

**Draft Best Practices for Indigenous Geographical Names
of Canada**

Submitted by Canada **

Summary:

The Geographical Names Board of Canada has developed the draft *Best Practices for Indigenous Geographical Names*, intended to support federal, provincial and territorial authorities in naming or renaming geographical features in Canada.

The draft *Best Practices for Indigenous Geographical Names* provides a set of core principles to consider when addressing geographical names with origins in Indigenous languages or cultures or determining whether such names exist for a particular geographical feature or place. The document is considered a draft while naming authorities of the Board seek feedback from Indigenous partners, advisory bodies and organizations.

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Canada's Draft Best Practices for Indigenous Geographical Names

Context

The Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) is the national coordinating body responsible for principles, procedures and guidelines for geographical naming in Canada. The Board is composed of members from federal, provincial and territorial government departments and agencies, each with specific responsibilities for their respective jurisdictions and mandates. Working together as a multi-jurisdictional national body, GNBC members ensure that geographical names are consistently managed in Canada.

The GNBC is supported by a Secretariat provided by Natural Resources Canada (NRCan), a department of the Government of Canada. NRCan provides infrastructure and support for the Canadian Geographical Names Database, the national database of authoritative geographical names and a key component of Canada's spatial data infrastructure.

Background

Place naming work across the jurisdictions in Canada has increasingly focussed on working with Indigenous communities and governments to recognize and restore Indigenous place names. As such, the 2014-2020 GNBC Strategic Plan specified strategic objectives to increase representation of Indigenous peoples on the Board, in the national geographical names database, and in external partnerships. The follow-up 2020-2025 GNBC Strategic Plan built upon those objectives, and includes objectives to increase cultural learning and develop national principles related to Indigenous place naming.

The GNBC's Indigenous Geographical Names Working Group, composed of nearly the entire GNBC membership, was tasked with working to achieve these objectives. This paper focuses on the work to create the draft *Best Practices on Indigenous Geographical Names*, published in February 2023.

Best Practices Development

Early discussions with the Indigenous Geographical Names Working Group began in 2020 and highlighted that members had different processes, expectations, and views on government-to-government relations with Indigenous peoples. It quickly became clear that before discussing a national principle, a common guideline document was needed to bring members onto the same page and set the baseline for recommended processes.

With considerable advice and input from the GNBC Indigenous Advisor at the time, the Working Group agreed that a document was needed to demonstrate the GNBC's commitment to respectful practices and recognition of Indigenous geographical naming. These discussions established the purpose, and context of the document.

1. Purpose

1.1 The *Best Practices for Indigenous Place Naming* are intended to support federal, provincial, and territorial naming authorities of the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) when naming or renaming geographical features within their jurisdiction. They provide a set of core principles to consider when addressing geographical names with origins in Indigenous languages, or determining if such names exist for a particular geographical feature or place.

2. Context

2.1 The GNBC is the coordinating body and community of practice for geographical names in Canada. The GNBC works through the authority of its federal, provincial and territorial members to adopt official place names, and establishes principles, procedures and guidelines for geographical naming in Canada.

2.2 Geographical names are of great historical and contemporary significance for Indigenous nations. They can reflect creation stories, environmental and ecological knowledge, important historical facts and cultural teachings. They are also critical for navigation and wayfinding, and for emergency response. They can convey the relationship between land and its inhabitants, or tell of places of danger, beauty, or gathering. Geographical names are an important part of the intangible cultural heritage of the many Indigenous nations in Canada. They are strong expressions of cultural identity, and their conservation and continued use promotes the vitality of Indigenous languages and cultural knowledge.

2.3 These best practices are informed by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), particularly Article 13, the right to designate and retain names for places, and Article 19, the principle of free, prior and informed consent, as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action (2015), and the First Nations Principles of OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession) (1998).

To recognize that provincial and territorial jurisdictions have different policies, procedures and legal obligations, a clarification on the application of this guideline was added for transparency purposes, as well as to ensure that the document would be representative and useful to all naming authorities in Canada.

3. Application

3.1 The principles outlined in this document are intended to supplement the jurisdictional policies and procedures of naming authorities, and promote a consistent approach to Indigenous geographical naming in Canada. They provide recommended approaches and standards for GNBC members to pursue, implement, or exceed, depending on the situation in their jurisdiction. The best practices are not intended to replace or preclude naming guidelines, policies and directives in place in federal, provincial and territorial jurisdictions, nor to be binding on any individual member of the GNBC.

After discussions and input from all naming authorities and jurisdictions in Canada, five core principles make up the main body of the document to recognize the GNBC's recognition of the significance of - and priority given to - Indigenous geographical names, commitment to meaningful engagement with communities, and respect for languages and orthographies. Lastly, it was important to articulate that GNBC members are committed to raising broad awareness in the general public of the presence and importance of Indigenous geographical names.

4. Core Principles

4.1 Recognition of historical and contemporary significance of Indigenous Geographical Names

The GNBC recognizes that Indigenous peoples have always used names for places and geographical features, in accordance with traditional naming practices and conventions. These names were in well-established use long before European colonization and the creation of Canada. In many cases, pre-existing Indigenous names for places and geographical features were ignored and overwritten. Some of these names have been recorded and remain in official use, but often their phonetic form or pronunciation has been altered and their cultural significance unrecognized. While colonization has resulted in a disruption in the use of traditional Indigenous names, many of these early names are still remembered and are often used by local communities. The official recognition and use of historical and contemporary Indigenous place names plays an important role in the safeguarding, preservation and revitalization of Indigenous cultural heritage.

4.2 Prioritization of Indigenous Names

The GNBC recognizes the need to prioritize the identification and the adoption of Indigenous names when naming or renaming geographical features. As these names may have been established and in use prior to colonization, in accordance with Principle 2 of the GNBC's *Principles and Procedures for Geographical Naming*, these names should be given first priority when considering a name for a geographical feature. Prioritization of Indigenous geographical names is a step toward reconciliation and helps to raise awareness of the many rich and vibrant Indigenous cultures in Canada.

The process to officially adopt Indigenous geographical names is implemented at the discretion of naming authorities according to jurisdictional policies and procedures. Each jurisdiction's approach is different, reflecting its particular geography, history, and circumstances.

4.3 Meaningful Engagement with Indigenous Communities

The GNBC recognizes the need to undertake meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities and their recognized Knowledge Holders in all aspects of Indigenous geographical place naming activities.

Meaningful engagement includes fostering genuine, honest and respectful relationships through open and ongoing dialogue, and acknowledging and respecting the requests, advice and decisions of Indigenous communities. The process and scope of engagement with Indigenous communities may vary according to the policies of naming authorities.

The GNBC acknowledges that Indigenous communities are the recognized experts and holders of traditional knowledge related to geographical names. The sharing or transmission of this knowledge is at the discretion of Indigenous communities and their recognized Knowledge Holders. When Indigenous communities choose to approach naming authorities with requests to have traditional or contemporary geographical names made official, care will be taken to confirm consent for the public dissemination of the cultural knowledge associated with the place names.

4.4 Recognition of Indigenous Languages, Writing Systems, and Geographical Naming Conventions

The GNBC recognizes that Indigenous geographical names encompass diverse languages of origin and writing systems. Many Indigenous geographical names originate within, and are shared through, oral traditions and cultural narratives of Indigenous nations, rather than through written records. The GNBC acknowledges the need to engage with the appropriate Indigenous community and request input from local experts such as Elders, Knowledge Holders, and fluent speakers to accurately record the language of origin, meaning, and pronunciation of a geographical name, and other information associated with it where possible. In consideration of Section 4.3 above, naming authorities should engage with Indigenous communities and Knowledge Holders to determine if there is a willingness to share publicly this often-protected traditional knowledge.

In accordance with Principle 8 of the GNBC's *Principles and Procedures for Geographical Naming*, names derived from Indigenous languages should be written according to the recommendations of linguistic specialists and be acceptable to the appropriate naming authorities and the communities concerned.

The GNBC recognizes that traditional approaches taken by Indigenous peoples to naming geographical features may differ from those used in non-Indigenous traditions. For example, a feature may have distinct names for different parts, such as a section of a river; a name may also apply to a group of features as a whole, or for an area or region, according to local Indigenous geographical naming conventions. As well, names in multiple Indigenous languages may exist for a particular feature. The process to adopt Indigenous geographical names is implemented at the discretion of naming authorities, according to jurisdictional policies and procedures.

4.5 Raising Awareness of Indigenous Geographical Names

The GNBC recognizes that Indigenous geographical names teach us about the time depth and geographical breadth of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and their relationships with the land. They are also a means to record, preserve, share, and revitalize Indigenous languages and dialects. In

accordance with Article 14 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, the GNBC recognizes that educational initiatives and broad communication are necessary to increase the level of awareness in the general population of the existence of Indigenous geographical names, their language, meaning, pronunciation, history, scope and significance.

Raising awareness may take many forms, including working with teachers and educators, development of interactive communications products, regular outreach through social media, and facilitation of discussion internally and externally to the GNBC.

The Indigenous Geographical Names Working Group presented the draft *Best Practices for Indigenous Geographical Names* to the GNBC in 2022 for review, discussion, and consensus to become a draft document of the Board. It was supported by all voting members as a draft document for further external review. Prior to consideration of the document for ratification, and in the spirit of ‘nothing about us, without us,’ GNBC members are seeking feedback from Indigenous partners, advisory bodies and organizations. All feedback received from all jurisdictions will be discussed at Working Group meetings and incorporated as needed. The draft *Best Practices for Indigenous Geographical Names* is published on the GNBC website for public access.

Related links:

[Indigenous Place Names \(canada.ca\)](#) – includes the draft Best Practices document

[Geographical Names Board of Canada](#) – includes the GNBC Strategic Plan

Points for discussion

The Group of Experts is invited to:

- (1) Take note of the effort made to support and promote Indigenous place naming and recognize its significance.
- (2) Consider best practices of Indigenous place-name standardization on the background of varying political and societal structures.
- (3) Express its views on the report and discuss different methods in support of strengthening respectful working with Indigenous place names.