

GEOGRAPHIC NAMES, CARTOGRAPHY AND GEOGRAPHY

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Any discussion of cartography should recognize the basic requirement that maps, charts, and related products must provide various identifiers to assure adequate recognition of depicted places. Unless such identifiers are applied, the resulting products cannot fully portray the objects they should. Among such identifiers are symbols, colors, and geographic names.

The main purposes of this paper are to: 1. Describe the importance of geographic names to a broad range of cartographic and other products dealing with places; 2. Articulate the need for geographers to become more involved with programs related to names; and 3. Recommend that the International Cartographic Association (ICA) pass a resolution urging the ICA and the International Geographical Union (IGU) to create a joint committee to assist in promoting programs to have accurate names for all places.

Numerous countries understand such requirements very well and have created national standards to assure that their official cartographic products portray appropriate information. A most significant element has been, and still is, that maps and charts should contain geographic names correctly spelled and accurately positioned. Clearly, other products such as globes, atlases, and reference publications also should portray correct names. Of course, all elements of the media should have access to accurate geographic names. Although the need for correct names had long been understood, the United States was the first nation to create an official agency to deal with the requirement that its official maps and charts carry such nomenclature. The United States Board on Geographic Names (BGN), established in 1890, was and continues to be staffed by representatives of various Federal offices responsible for making maps and charts. The BGN succeeded in creating principles, policies, and procedures to assure the accuracy of geographic names carried on official cartographic products.

Other nations created similar bodies. In 1897, Canada created the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (renamed the Geographical Names Board of Canada in 2000), and in 1917 the United Kingdom formed the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use. Since then, additional nations have established names bodies, although results have been mixed. Bi-national collaboration has also been attempted, but often goals have not been fully reached. During and after World War II, the US and the UK cooperated closely to develop maps and charts of areas of their common interests. Since then, US and UK geographic names authorities have continued to meet regularly to define and implement stated goals. The results have been exceedingly beneficial to both countries.

Prior to 1955, representatives from various countries met to seek support from the United Nations for the development of a program to assure the accuracy of geographic names. After several years, the UN agreed and in 1967 convened the first Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. At that session, and in subsequent conferences held every five years in various countries,

the UN approved numerous actions to promote the declared requirement to “standardize geographical names.” A related body is the UN Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) that meets every two years as well as in association with five-year UN conferences. The UNGEGN convenes to report on work carried out to fulfill resolutions promulgated at UN conferences and to undertake other assigned tasks. Participants at these sessions include national delegates who have been active professionally and academically in programs related to names, as well as representatives from national missions who may have less involvement. Results of UN relationships have been most impressive, yet there are some who feel that certain agenda articles lack significance.

This ICC session brings attention to the fact that the International Cartographic Association is a major professional body that has long recognized names as an essential element of any knowledge about the world (as well as extraterrestrial features). There are numerous examples, both online and in print, that reference the importance that ICA and other organizations have given to names. Along with the UN and other international and national bodies, the ICA deserves credit for these efforts. Similarly, these bodies have identified other programs related to names that need further implementation. However, the extent to which such efforts have been coordinated and applied remains an open question.

Logically it would seem that the International Geographical Union (IGU) would also support the position that geographic names are essential elements of cartography. For this reason, any major program related to cartography should seek the collaboration of the IGU. Evidently such an involvement has not been developed.

Another program that focuses on cartography and geographic names falls under the purview of the Pan American Institute on Geography and History (PAIGH). Founded in 1928 with member nations from South, Central, and North America, PAIGH in 1941 formed a new major element, the Cartography Commission. That body has played a significant role in assuring that its member nations adopt new and increasingly effective practices for the surveying and mapping of their territories and other significant areas. Its statement of purpose suggests the commission should participate in the basic tasks of PAIGH, including geographic names. It does not, however, call for any specific functions to standardize names. It does, however, mention how the commission should promote knowledge about names and how it collaborates with organizations involved with same.

Given that the ICC is holding this meeting in Chile, it is fully appropriate to describe how PAIGH has been a key supporter for some 20 years of a program designed to instruct member nations on how best to acquire accurate spellings, identifiers, and locations of geographic features in their areas. While other nations have held similar instructional programs, supported mainly by UN organizations, they appear to be offered on a one-time basis. On the other hand, the PAIGH effort (under a Working Group on Geographical Names, which is part of the Cartography Commission) features an annual course. These courses, which last two weeks, include essential elements, which when implemented, help assure that a nation’s geographic names are correctly identified, located with accurate coordinates, and correctly spelled.

The PAIGH course plan was created in 1985 at a meeting in Panama through the support of the US Defense Mapping Agency (now the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency) and PAIGH. The curriculum comprised of recommendations put forth by representatives of the US, Canada, Mexico, Panama, and several other PAIGH states, with the understanding that expenses for travel and local housing would be divided between PAIGH and participating countries. Since its inception in 1987, the course has been presented 18 times, with typically, 20 to 25 persons in attendance each year. Most participants are affiliated with the cartographic and geographic agencies of the host country, but representatives from other nations may also attend. Representatives of the US play a major role in planning and teaching the course, and experts from other PAIGH countries also participate.

The current course curriculum includes topics developed over the years to reflect new concepts and knowledge acquired by the planners of the course. The initial portion consists of classroom instruction, outlining not only the course content but also the many technical and linguistic aspects of geographic names as both an academic and a practical field of study. The second element discusses geographic information systems and how they are used for the collection and organization of names. A third component is field work, whereby teams visit an area to locate features that either do not have officially recorded names, or that have two or more names. These disparate names might be registered in official documents, or used by local populations, or might have different spellings. Another task is to compile accurate geographic coordinates for features. The teams duly record such information, along with other relevant facts.

A fourth aspect of the course has two parts. The first consists of research conducted by a group of students, typically one-half of the class, who have assembled names found in official documents. This group then reviews half of the names that were collected through the field exercise. The group then presents the documented names to the remaining students, who serve as the body that will review and approve the names for official use. After a period of time, the assignments are reversed, with the collection group becoming the reviewing group, and vice versa. This exchange of roles assures that all course members become familiar with procedures whereby names are judged and decisions rendered accordingly. Decisions by the staff may legally become official and therefore applicable for cartographic or other purposes. However, if another body in that nation already has the authority to approve names for official purposes, such as an existing National Committee on Geographic Names, such “approved” names are then submitted to that group for final acceptance. Conversely, they may be returned for further research. Another action is for the group to draft a resolution that the host country should establish a national or regional names authority (if none exists).

Since the first course in Panama in 1987, other host countries have been Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, and Peru. The courses have been offered every year except for two occasions when financial problems interfered. Several countries have hosted the course twice. For the first time outside Central or South America, the most recent course (2009) was hosted by Spain, which serves as an associate member of PAIGH. Although no new national standardization agencies have been formed as a result of the courses, all participating nations have gained valuable information about principles, policies, and procedures, and names standardization.

Although the courses have been supported principally by cartographic organizations, it is essential to note the significant role played by individuals having formal training and experience in the field of geography. For example, another PAIGH committee working on generic terms associated with names was initiated by Meredith F. Burrill, a notable geographer who worked with the US Department of Interior and subsequently with the Defense Mapping Agency. He was for many years the leading US expert on names and also served as the Executive Secretary of the US Board on Geographic Names. He played a significant role in creating the UN names program. Succeeding him in 1973 was Richard R. Randall, who earlier had worked as a geographer with several US agencies in various capacities. He was then employed as the geographer of the Defense Mapping Agency, serving as the Executive Secretary of BGN, and also representing the US in a number of UN names programs. He was instrumental in the establishment of the aforementioned PAIGH course and was involved in teaching elements of the first five courses until 1992. Roger L. Payne, of the US Geological Survey and also a geographer, succeeded Randall in 1993 as the BGN Executive Secretary. He also has served as a principal US representative at UN sessions and has played a key role in the PAIGH courses, even following his retirement in 2006.

Numerous other experts involved with the PAIGH courses have had a strong background in geography. Such knowledge provides them with a comprehension of the relationships between names and the features they represent. For example, understanding the nature of mountains and their associated elements helps to define and comprehend the characteristics and locations of these features. Naturally, having a knowledge of cartography is also important. Furthermore, working with linguists who specialize in specific languages and their writing systems enables geographers to deal with names effectively.

The fact that the term “geographic name” is most frequently used to describe a natural feature demonstrates the relevance of the two words. A natural feature on the earth’s surface or under its seas that carries a name to identify it necessarily has a geographic nature. Of course, there are numerous terms that can be used to distinguish names of rivers, mountains, cities, valleys, and other features. The association of geography with terminology describing natural features is, therefore, a fundamental explanation of why the sphere of geography is tied to the field of “geographic names.” Other well-known terms are “place names” and “toponyms.” One factor related to the application of the term is that non-natural man-made features, such as “city, county, road, or neighborhood” may also be seen as geographic in nature and thus can be identified with a geographic name.

As stated previously, cartographic products and related reference documents require accurate geographic names. Therefore it is quite understandable why national and international agencies that produce maps and charts should actively promote programs to provide accurate names. The connection between names and geography logically dictates that national and international bodies dealing with geography at academic or practical levels should also collaborate to promote their common involvement with geographic names. In this respect, participants at the ICC should make a resolution calling for the International Cartographic Association and the International Geographical Union to create a joint body to:

1. Keep each organization informed of relevant programs at local or international levels related to the promotion of accurate geographic names;
2. Identify areas each believes still require attention regarding accurate names;
3. Formulate a common program to cope with areas needing consideration, and through a joint effort, request

action by appropriate organization(s); 4. Pursue resulting progress and record and publicize consequences to appropriate groups; and 5. Seek implementation of any programs not completed. At the same time, it is also recommended that PAIGH assign a person to review the work of such an ICA-IGU body and provide recommendations as needed to fulfill stated goals.

As a summary for this article, it should be noted that geographic names have functions other than being essential elements for cartography. The Northeast Asian History Foundation held a meeting in Washington, DC in June 2009, covering the subject of “Historical and Global Aspects of Geographic Names.” Its purpose was to present a history of the names of two features, the “East Sea,” a body of water between Korea and Japan, and Dokdo, an island in that body of water close to South Korea (the US version of the island’s name is Liancourt Rocks). The staff presented geographers and academics from South Korea with an intensive knowledge of the dispute between Japan and South Korea as to the sovereignty of the island. They provided detailed information supporting their position that Dokdo should be internationally recognized as Korean territory and as the Korean name, and also that the body of water should carry two names to reflect the Japanese and Korean views: Sea of Japan and East Sea (these names are spelled in the Roman alphabet in accordance with BGN principles). A program note commented that the names Dokdo and East Sea, as supported by South Korea, were important because they are related to this philosophical comment: “Geographical names sometimes bear significant symbolic value to a nation, reflecting the history, culture, lifestyle, and philosophy of the people who use them.” This statement can relate to the entire academic and practical significance of the field of geographic names.

In regard to the PAIGH courses, it is appropriate to note their motto: “Toponimia: La Clave para la Comunicación Global.” This statement well summarizes how geographic names are essential elements not only for cartography but also for a wide range of communications.