

The US Board on Geographic Names and International Programs

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Abstract

While its initial goal was to standardize names in the United States, the US Board on Geographic Names soon broadened its work to include names in other areas. This activity required the creation of international programs in which the Board collaborated with individual countries, groups of countries, international organizations, and the United Nations.

Preface

For a number of years, the US Board on Geographic Names (BGN) has enjoyed the collegial company and support of Dr. Kelsie B. Harder, Distinguished Teaching Professor at the Potsdam College of the State University of New York. As long-time editor of *Names* and by virtue of his acceptance of many articles submitted by representatives of the Board, Dr. Harder has become well acquainted with the legal mandate of the Board to standardize geographic names for official US and other purposes. His relationship with the Board was further enhanced when he gave the keynote address at the BGN Centennial Celebration in Washington, D. C., September 6–8, 1990. While Dr. Harder has a natural interest in names in the United States, his awareness of the Board's work in all other world areas is also significant. This article was the basis of remarks presented by the author at the BGN Centennial and it is his pleasure to submit it as part of the festschrift honoring Dr. Harder.

Introduction

A common dictionary definition of the term "international" is: "Common to or affecting two or more nations." Perhaps another level of definition is that when two nations develop agreement for action, they

have not an international but a bilateral arrangement. Three or more parties have a multilateral understanding.

In regard to the Board and international programs, the author recommends yet another different meaning. "International" covers any arrangement or program the Board has with one or more countries or with an international organization that results in representatives of the Board working with representatives of other countries on an activity oriented to a single task or a broader program of functions related to geographic names.

Within the scope of the Board's work it is possible that a program can be managed principally by one or two individuals or a committee. In any case such actions are based on and should implement valid Board program goals and objectives.

In the sense of this presentation, individual participation in academic organizations — or those covering geographic names as a part of broader but related topics — although sometimes useful, may not be seen as Board-mission oriented.

Early Board Directions

The original mission of the Board was aimed principally at problems affecting domestic names. It is true that names in Alaska were the subject of perhaps the Board's first research, and it is also true that names in Puerto Rico received attention. But these areas were subject to some degree of US control, and agreement with outside sovereignty was not required.

It is also true that concern with foreign names — and with non-roman writing systems — occupied Board attention from the beginning. Its first report (1890–91) included decisions on about eighty names of foreign places, along with three times as many variant names noted for the record. Another early Board action related to foreign names was its adoption of the Royal Geographical Society's pronunciation system.

Yet another indication of the Board's early interest in foreign territories was the fact that its first member agencies included the Department of State and the US Hydrographic office. Their role was to assure that official US maps, charts, and communications applied names that conformed as nearly as possible to those in local usage by other countries. The Board also adopted romanization systems developed by those countries for application to native cartographic products. Even

with a generous definition of the term "international," however, the Board did not become seriously committed to international programs until some years later.

International Programs

This section deals with Board programs that include international activities. Of course, the interests of the country lay behind any Board work, yet these interests clearly extend to supporting names standardization on a worldwide basis.

Antarctic Names and Names of Undersea Features

In 1912 the Board dealt with Antarctica for the first time when it made decisions on twelve names in that area. Later, when the US was involved in the Second World War, a special committee on Antarctica was set up as part of the Board when the country realized it had a national requirement to name features on that continent. After the Board was reestablished in 1947, it created the Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names (ACAN) to develop more systematic procedures for collecting names.

Active collaboration was soon established with the British Antarctic Placenames Committee (APC), which also had been active in certain parts of Antarctica. Members of ACAN and APC have corresponded for many years to discuss proposed names and to assure maximum concurrence. Each committee informs the other of actions taken and, as expected, there is a collegial atmosphere of debate where differences are found.

New Zealand also has a names authority and has communicated with ACAN as to general principles, policies, and procedures for naming features in areas of interest to that country.

ACAN just recently published its fourth edition of a gazetteer of Antarctic names. This edition contains some 6,000 names, an expansion of about seven hundred more than the edition of 1980. Increasingly, the names approved by ACAN include those also accepted by other countries.

The Advisory Committee on Undersea Features (ACUF) also works with other national authorities. As noted elsewhere in this article, ACUF cooperates with its Canadian counterpart, and the author has worked with the United Nations and the International Hydrographic Organization in various aspects of undersea naming. ACUF also collaborates with Japan in naming features.

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The fourth edition of the ACUF Undersea Features Gazetteer was issued in 1990. It contains 6,700 names.

The Board and the UK Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use

Prior to its reorganization in 1947, the Board had collaborated informally with its counterpart in the UK, the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use (PCGN), which was established in 1919. Shortly after 1947, the Board met with PCGN and began a series of conferences. These meetings have taken place about every two years with each national authority alternatively serving as host. The 16th conference is scheduled in London some time in 1992.

These meetings have brought many benefits to both countries.

With regard to romanization (i.e., conversion of non-roman-alphabet names to spellings in the roman alphabet), the bodies have collaborated for many years. At present, there are twenty-nine BGN/PCGN romanization systems. The US and UK have also developed common positions in other areas. In addition to having played important roles in the creation of UN names programs, they also collaborate at UN meetings, often in connection with other countries, to help assure that actions accord with common interests.

Thus, while holding to different national requirements in various regards, the US/UK history of working together in the field of names is a good example of international cooperation.

The United Nations

In 1958, after hearing from a group of US and other national names experts, the United Nations expressed interest in supporting a program to provide guidance to all nations concerning names. The US provided a statement which, along with other commentary, led to the creation of a committee on geographic names. This later was termed a working group and it subsequently recommended that a full UN conference be convened to investigate how member nations could deal with names in their countries. A conference met in 1967 and produced a series of resolutions which to this day are seen by many as unsurpassed in laying down basic principles and defining goals and objectives of national and international names standardization.

Resulting from recommendations of the first conference, four additional sessions have taken place, the last in Montreal in 1987. Another important UN action was to create a Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) to meet between conferences and implement resolutions.

Board members and staff have played effective roles in UN programs. In addition to his early UN contributions, Dr. Meredith F. Burrill, BGN Executive Secretary from 1947 to 1973, also served as president of the first (1967) conference and chairman of the UNGEGN for several years afterwards. Staff and members of the BGN Foreign Names Committee attended all of the conferences and participated in leadership roles and in preparing reports. At the third (1977) and subsequent conferences, representatives of the BGN Domestic Names Committee were part of the US delegation.

BGN participation has been effective in many areas. A UNGEGN Working Group of Undersea Features was led by the author from 1975 to its abolishment in 1987. He introduced mechanisms long employed by the BGN ACUF and succeeded in having them adopted by the Working Group. The group was disbanded after carrying out its mission, namely to develop principles, policies, and procedures which nations could use in naming undersea features. He also called for a program to determine how UN functions could be improved. This action is now underway. Other representatives of the Board have contributed to UN programs. Mr. Donald J. Orth of the US Geological Survey and BGN Executive Secretary for Domestic Names from 1973 to 1990, prepared a guide on the creation and operation of a national names authority as a UN document. Mr. Roger L. Payne, also of the US Geological Survey and the current BGN Executive Secretary for Domestic Names, has actively promoted ADP for names work. Many other BGN representatives have also made important contributions to this international area.

*The Board and the Canadian Permanent Committee
on Geographical Names*

Ties between the names authorities of the two countries have been characterized by congenial and productive cooperation for many years. Perhaps the most significant program concerns names of features that cross our common boundary. Realizing that many features have different names, the Board and the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (CPCGN) established a joint body to study the problem and

make recommendations. The result is the US/Canada Boundary Names Committee, which has met on several occasions and has issued principles concerning the treatment of such names. The work of the group has necessarily involved the US/Canada Boundary Commissions, whose tasks are to formally demarcate the boundary, keep relevant records, and provide maps with accepted names of features. The work of the US/Canada Boundary Names Committee has revealed interesting data about names, and the reasons for their differences as well as grounds for retaining differences, in some cases in response to local cultures.

Several years ago, BGN ACUF representatives met with their Canadian counterparts in an effort to develop common principles for their work. Agreement was reached in all major areas.

Representatives of both countries meet periodically as the UN-GEGN US/Canada Division to discuss national and "bilateral" programs related to UNGEGN-based activities. These meetings have been productive and further mark the good relations between the two nations. Recently, the requirement to capture Native American names in the United States generated discussions with the CPCGN concerning that agency's comparable program.

CPCGN representatives participated in various program elements at the BGN Centennial and again demonstrated how their international cooperation was of mutual benefit.

International Hydrographic Organization

The International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) is a body where maritime member nations can discuss a range of common interests in navigation, marine safety, and other matters related to shipping. One major activity is the General Bathymetric Chart of the Ocean (GEBCO), now in its fifth edition and providing general maritime information on eleven charts at the scale of 1:10 million. The committee responsible for GEBCO has a Subcommittee of Geographical Names and Nomenclature of Ocean Bottom Features which approves names for submarine features depicted on the GEBCO series.

When the UN dissolved the Working Group of Undersea Features several years ago, it was agreed that the IHO should be considered an appropriate agency to keep records of undersea names as required for GEBCO. The author serves as a UN liaison with IHO to provide counsel as needed. At past sessions of names, he advised members to modify the

GEBCO lists of names and the format and content of publications on names. Recommendations were based on practices also favored by the UN and were adopted; the UN recommendations, in turn, reflected ACUF programs. Items IHO accepted included identification of generic terms as integral parts of names, the combination of a statement of principles and lists of names into a single publication; and the adoption of forms for proposing new names. Thus, the Board played a useful role in another international organization.

The Pan American Institute of Geography and History

Founded some sixty-five years ago, the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH) has a proud record of academic and practical functions benefiting the member nations. (Virtually all countries of the Western Hemisphere are affiliated with PAIGH, itself part of the Organization of American States.) Dr. Burrill participated in a (PAIGH) committee concerning geographic terminology for several years. The principal aim was to develop a list of generic terms associated with placenames. When the author replaced Dr. Burrill in 1973, he continued the same program.

About five years later, PAIGH adopted a new topographic mapping program at 1:250,000 in cooperation with the Inter American Geodetic Survey (an arm of the Defense Mapping Agency dedicated to fostering better surveying and mapping techniques in Latin America). The acceptance of the new mapping program prompted the author to propose that PAIGH also adopt a gazetteer program based on names on the new maps. This was approved in 1982. Soon it was evident that the participating nations also needed to improve their national naming practices.

Although the UNGEGN has a Latin American Division to promote names standardization, few nations could afford to attend UN conferences or divisional meetings. Realizing UN programs were not benefiting the division, the author further proposed the creation of a PAIGH training program and proceeded to design a two-week course. This effort was adopted several years ago and in late November and early December of 1990, the third annual PAIGH course took place in Chile. The fourth course is scheduled in late 1991. Much of the course content reflects ideas and procedures applied by the Board.

The course has been recognized by the UN as a valuable contribution to international efforts to promote names standardization. Mr. Henri

Dorion, chairman of the UNGEGN and the CPCGN, has taught methods of field collection. Mr. Payne of the USGS has given instruction in automated techniques of names processing. The author has taught topics on policies, principles, and procedures. Local names experts also have taught certain topics, reflecting their own expertise. The PAIGH effort reflects a BGN principle to share its experiences with other nations. There is good evidence that the participating nations have gained valuable information and skills about names standardization.

Summary.

The Board is now one hundred years old. Its programs have persisted despite periodic reorganizations and recurring budget limitations. While designed to meet US goals, its members and staff have successfully upgraded its vision to include the larger world-nation. By pursuing principles laid down by its founders a century ago and further improved by literally hundreds of successors, the Board and the country it serves can take pride in its contributions to the field of geographic names – and world communications – at the international level.

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Note

1. This is a revision of a talk given at the Board on Geographic Names Centennial Symposium on September 7, 1990, at the Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. For a recent article outlining the structure and mission of the Board see the author's "The U. S. Board on Geographic Names and Its Work in Foreign Areas," *Names* 38.3 (September 1990): 173–82.