

Geographical Names – Power, Meaning and Necessities

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Abstract

The importance of geographical names or toponyms can be defined by a single question: "Where did this event occur?" The mere mention of a place-name is enough to accurately locate the event.

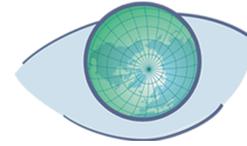
Geographical names relating to places and features are very important today and are frequently used to access geographical space by referring to an analogical or digital world. They are indispensable in positioning any spatially organized information system, and allow the integration of digital data sets, thus becoming essential, powerful decision-making tools for policy-makers and managers in all sectors and levels of private and public business.

Geographical names are more than just place-names on a map. They are an important way of communicating and linking local, national and international organizations at all levels of cooperation. They intertwine and integrate elements of history, geography, cartography, language, linguistics, culture, tradition, folklore, psychology, politics, geographic indications, and more. Toponyms connect people and the land, while bearing a strong cultural and empowering significance.

Toponyms can be seen from several points of view. Sometimes they are a problem, not only for cartographers, but for anyone who needs to work with them. Therefore, they need a well-defined, error-free, unambiguous geographical system of reference. The standardization of geographical names at all levels means that ambiguity and problems caused by different languages and scripts can be avoided.

At the national level, it is important to establish an authority or geographical names commission whose primary objective is to standardise, resolve user issues regarding geographical names, and restore, based on revitalised concepts, the sociocultural and historical value of geographical names. These must be treated in a systematic, consistent way, according to new insights acquired from technological and socio-political changes. A policy of generation, maintenance and availability must be applied for the benefit of all possible users.

Since it was established in 1946, the United Nations has addressed the need for geographical names standardization. The UNGEGN (United Nations Group of Experts in Geographical Names) has the task of following up Conference resolutions, encouraging national standardization, and setting up a structure of Working Groups and Divisions to address questions of general or regional interest – 12 Working Groups and special committees, and 23 geographical/linguistic Divisions.



Encouraged by the UNGEGN, the ICA (International Cartographic Association) and IGU (International Geographic Union) created the Joint IGU/ICA Commission/ Working Group on Toponymy in 2011. In 2015, it was confirmed by the ICA as the Joint IGU/ICA Commission on Toponymy. Its Terms of Reference state its purpose: “To act jointly with the IGU fostering geographic and cartographic research in all fields involving toponymy” and “to disseminate scientific knowledge on processing and using toponyms in geography and cartography”. Thus, the Commission on Toponymy strongly encourages the creation of national authorities and commissions on toponymy or geographical names, acting jointly with the UNGEGN, to define a standardized mode for the toponymy of each country.

The Commission, comprising the Chair Group, eight full members and corresponding members, has an extensive agenda covering all important ICA and IGU events and programmed events by partners, such as the Pan-American Symposium on Toponymy, International Symposium on Place Names, and others. Thus, the Commission is considered a powerful generator of research in toponymy and geographical names, mainly related to cartography and geography, and related subjects.

Keywords: geographical names, toponymy, standardization of geographical names, national authority on geographical names