



# Best Practices for Indigenous Place Naming

Geographical Names Board of Canada

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### 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 are strong expressions of cultural identity, and their conservation and continued use promotes the vitality of Indigenous languages and cultural knowledge. They convey creation stories, ecological knowledge, important historical facts, cultural narratives, and may commemorate individuals that hold a longstanding relationship with a place. They are critical for navigation and wayfinding and can assist with emergency response. Geographical names are an important part of the intangible cultural heritage of the many Indigenous Nations in Canada and reflect the enduring relationship between Indigenous peoples and their traditional land use areas.

#### 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). These best practices are also informed by the place name provisions in settled land claims and self-government agreements in Canada.



### 3. Core Principles

#### 3.1 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. Many place 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 place names, many of these names are remembered and used by local communities. The GNBC also recognizes that place naming is an ongoing cultural practice among Indigenous peoples. Indigenous communities may choose to propose new Indigenous names for geographical features. 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.

#### 3.2 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 many of these names were 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 by naming authorities according to jurisdictional policies and procedures. Each jurisdiction's approach is different, reflecting its particular geography, history, and circumstances.

#### 3.3 Meaningful Engagement with Indigenous Governments and Communities

The GNBC recognizes the need to undertake meaningful engagement with Indigenous governments and communities and their recognized Knowledge Holders when creating or updating policies pertaining to Indigenous place naming and when making geographical name decisions within the traditional land use areas of Indigenous communities.

Meaningful engagement includes fostering genuine, honest and respectful relationships through open and ongoing dialogue, and full and careful consideration of feedback received from Indigenous governments and communities. The process and scope of engagement with Indigenous governments and communities is implemented according to the policies of naming authorities.



The GNBC acknowledges that Indigenous communities are the experts and holders of traditional knowledge related to their communities, cultures and histories, and recognizes the right of Indigenous peoples to access, control, and own knowledge produced about their geographical names and the cultural understandings associated with place names. The sharing or transmission of knowledge about Indigenous place names is at the discretion of Indigenous communities and their recognized Knowledge Holders. When Indigenous communities or governments 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.

### **3.4 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 government or community(ies) and to seek input from local experts such as Elders, Knowledge Holders, and fluent speakers to accurately record the language of origin, meaning, orthographic form, spelling, and pronunciation of a geographical name.

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 language experts and be acceptable to the appropriate GNBC naming authorities and the community(ies) 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 GNBC will work toward broadening its understanding of what constitutes a feature type / generic in order to reflect and accommodate geographic realities and cultural perspectives of Indigenous governments and communities. The process to adopt Indigenous geographical names is implemented in accordance with the jurisdictional policies and procedures of GNBC naming authorities.

### **3.5 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.

#### **4. Application**

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 also provide recommended approaches and principles for GNBC members to consider when supporting the geographical naming efforts of Indigenous governments and communities 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.

#### **5. Effective Date and Maintenance**

This best practices document was adopted by the federal, provincial and territorial members of the GNBC on October 21, 2025.

To ensure that it remains current, relevant and effective, this best practices document will be reviewed in conjunction with GNBC strategic planning activities, at minimum on a 5-year cycle.

#### **6. Enquiries**

Enquires concerning this best practices document as applied to officially adopting Indigenous geographical names should be directed to federal, provincial and territorial naming authorities of the [Geographical Names Board of Canada](#).

General enquiries may be addressed to:

Geographical Names Board of Canada Secretariat  
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