

**Item 17 of the Provisional Agenda**

**Geographical names and cultural heritage**

**Proposed Criteria For Establishing And Evaluating  
The Cultural Heritage Of Place Names \***

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\* Prepared by Marc Richard, Commission de toponymie du Québec, Quebec, Canada

# PROPOSED CRITERIA FOR ESTABLISHING AND EVALUATING THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF PLACE NAMES

Marc Richard,  
Commission de toponymie du Québec, Quebec, Canada

## **Abstract**

Resolution 4 of the Ninth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names encourages official bodies responsible for toponymy to develop a program for safeguarding toponyms that meet the criteria for application of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. It is recommended that criteria be incorporated into the Principles of Office Treatment of Geographical Names (I/4C) to prevent inappropriate changes to names, as well as the rejection of names that reflect cultural heritage when it comes time to assign an official name to an unnamed place. Criteria relative to the age, scarcity, testimoniality, attractiveness and imageability of the geographical names are suggested for experts to consider. Moreover, it seems reasonable to question whether compiling lists of geographical names imbued with cultural heritage could threaten the maintenance, in national gazetteers, of toponyms of considerable interest but which are not on such lists. When safeguarding a name imbued with cultural heritage proves impossible *in situ*, it is recommended to consider the possibility of recycling toponyms.

## 1. Background

Resolution 4 of the Ninth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names encourages official bodies responsible for toponymy to: (a) identify toponyms that meet the criteria for application of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage; (b) submit them for approval to the Committee set up by the convention; (c) prepare a programme to safeguard [emphasis added] and promote that heritage in accordance with article 2, paragraph 3, and article 18 of the Convention; (d) start implementing it.

Included among the measures most likely to threaten the integrity of geographical names as cultural heritage—other than failing to survey toponyms that exist only in thousand-year-old oral traditions and hence essentially in the memory of elders—are measures to change geographical names. When a naming authority decides to replace toponyms that are part of the most valued toponymic strata, world cultural heritage is weakened: safeguarding and promoting the world’s toponymic heritage is tied to actions taken by the naming authorities in each State, in the same way that international standardization in toponymy is dependent on standardization efforts carried out at the national level.

We believe that safeguarding geographical names as cultural heritage must be as far upstream as possible in the flow of the naming authority’s activities, and to accomplish that, we believe that provisions should be incorporated into the Principles of Office Treatment of Geographical Names, as specified in Recommendation C of Resolution 4 adopted by the First Conference, which focussed on national standardization. It would be helpful if this resolution were re-formulated.

What geographical names should the authorities protect from changes?

To safeguard geographical names and protect them from inappropriate changes, the names need to be properly evaluated when it comes time to select one as an official name for an unnamed place, or when a request is made to replace a name. The criteria used in the selection process should identify a name whose rejection or replacement would undermine cultural heritage. Below are a few evaluation criteria experts may wish to consider.

## 2. Proposed criteria

### Age

The age of a place name can be defined in two ways:

1. Its age as indicated by the date of the oldest possible record of the name.
2. The duration of the name’s continuous use up to the present.

### Notes

It is possible that a name that goes far back in time can disappear from use for a certain period of time, and then be retrieved and reported as historical information, or even re-

established to designate the same place, or recycled and used in another geographical location. See the section on the recycling of place names below.

*Age* is clearly the criterion that first comes to mind when attempting to characterize a place name as cultural heritage. It is not however the only characteristic that can be used to denote the outstanding significance of a geographical name. The most valued toponymic stratum of national geographical names also seems to include toponyms with the attributes of *scarcity*, *testimony*, *attractiveness* and *imageability*.

### **Scarcity**

1. Scarcity corresponds to the very limited use of a toponym in a given territory. It could be unique.
2. Scarcity also corresponds to the very limited occurrence of a *toponymic phenomenon* in a given territory, as a combination of toponym features, the place it designates, and the environment the place is part of.

### **Testimony**

The testimony of a geographical name consists of:

1. Its capacity to embody the spirit of a place;
2. Its capacity to clearly embody a cultural, geographical, historical or social reality that is specific to the place and an essential component of local, regional or national identity;
3. Its capacity to embody a reality that stands out because it is rare, even if the toponym itself is not.

#### Note

The name in question may prove to be a valuable indicator of diverse situations such as a rare, extinct, threatened, regional language; the presence of a minority community; a reminder of a significant event or simply a well-known anecdote closely connected with the place; the validation of a situation or historic action, a national symbol of an achievement, tragedy, or a historical or legendary character, etc.

### **Attractiveness**

The attractiveness of a geographical name corresponds to a feeling of belonging associated with the name and the place it designates.

#### Note

Interest in a toponym is certainly visible through its use in opinion pieces or in literature. General interest in a toponym is also seen through its use for artistic or commercial purposes, specifically in advertising and corporate names.

### **Imageability**

The imageability of a name is its capacity to inspire ideas or strong, rich images within users.

#### Notes

*Imageability* is a term defined by Kevin Lynch in his book *The Image of the City* (1960) as “that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer. It is that shape, colour, or arrangement which facilitates the

making of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful mental images of the environment.”

The concept of imageability also resonates in the work of Umberto Eco, particularly with regard to his ideas on the *open logic of the signifier* as applied to works—in our case toponyms—which have the capacity to trigger fascination or questions for the reader, owing to the non-definitive nature of the message conveyed by such works—or such toponyms.

### **3. An unexpected consequence of compiling lists of toponyms to be protected**

We believe that compiling lists of toponyms that meet the criteria for the application of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and submitting them for approval to the committee set up by the Convention could produce an unexpected impact on geographical names that do not appear on such lists. Could such lists not have the effect of undermining the value of geographical names not on the lists, despite the potential interest of a substantial part of this corpus that is not recognized under the terms of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage? We believe that is possible, and we are concerned about the future stability of such names in national gazetteers. Not being on the list of toponyms recognized by the Convention we believe would increase their vulnerability in the face of political decisions. We believe that including criteria for the evaluation of toponyms as cultural heritage among the Principles of Office Treatment of Geographical Names would be a better way to safeguard these toponyms than creating a list of names to be protected.

### **4. Last resort: recycling toponyms**

If naming authorities are unable to maintain a place name as cultural heritage or select such a recently surveyed name that is in use and assign it to a place with no official name, such a name could be preserved if it were recycled. The priority should be to recycle the toponym within the same geographical environment, because that is where the connection between geographical name and the spirit of the place is most significant, and hence the most authentic. The question remains whether such recycling of geographical names with a cultural heritage could lead to the destabilization of many names that have been securely anchored in place for centuries? Such a perversion of this measure of last resort cannot be excluded if it is not applied in good faith. We have plans to present a paper on the recycling of toponyms at the next session of UNGEGN.