

Aligning Place Naming with Community Expectations: Developing the Australian Place Naming Principles

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SUMMARY

This paper explores the development of the Australian Place Naming Principles, a collaborative initiative led by the Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping (ICSM) Place Names Working Group (PNWG). The principles aim to ensure consistency, accuracy, and inclusivity in place naming. This document replaces the Principles for the Consistent Use of Place Names and aligns with international best practices set by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names.

A key focus of the updated principles is addressing contemporary community expectations, particularly in relation to cultural sensitivity, safety, and the effective delivery of services. The principles also support the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander place names, dual naming, and commemorative naming while promoting community engagement.

The updated principles focus on three core areas:

1. **Consistency** in place naming across Australia.
2. **Accuracy and accessibility** of naming information, particularly for emergency services.
3. **Inclusivity** by recognising cultural heritage, supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander names, and ensuring place names do not cause offence.

The paper highlights the importance of collaboration in shaping place naming principles that are practical, inclusive, and fit for purpose. By establishing clear guidelines and promoting consistency in place naming, the Australian Place Naming Principles will enhance public services, improve geographical data management, and reflect the diverse identities and histories of Australian communities. Continued stakeholder engagement will refine the principles, ensuring they reflect community expectations and needs.

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INTRODUCTION

The Intergovernmental Committee on Surveying and Mapping (ICSM) Place Names Working Group (PNWG) brings together place name authorities from both Australia and New Zealand. The group works collaboratively to establish modern, inclusive, and consistent practices that reflect the evolving needs and values of our diverse communities. The PNWG has developed the Australian Place Naming Principles (the principles) to provide a consistent and unified approach to place naming in Australia.

The updated principles replace the previous “Principles for the Consistent Use of Place Names” and are designed to address contemporary community expectations, with a focus on safety, cultural sensitivity and inclusivity. They recognise the critical role of place names in supporting various functions such as economic development, research, conservation, service delivery, and reflecting Australia's cultural identity and values.

Aligned with the resolutions set out by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, the principles adhere to international best practices and support Australian government authorities in updating local place naming policies. This alignment ensures greater effectiveness in public services and better representation of diverse communities.

The aim of this paper is to explore the development process of the Australian Place Naming Principles, the collaborative nature of this effort, and the importance of inclusivity in shaping the document.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, there has been significant interest in place naming, especially regarding the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Furthermore, there has been an increase in place names that celebrate the diversity of our communities, including names that commemorate women and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This has led to a growing demand for guidance and advice from naming authorities, both within and outside of government. However, challenges arise because the standardisation of naming practices across Australia is not consistently applied.

The current Australian place naming document, "Principles for the Consistent Use of Place Names," was created in 2009 and last revised in 2016. It contains content that extends beyond the intended scope of the group, causing a lack of clarity and focus. Consequently, the

document no longer serves its original purpose effectively and needs revision to align with contemporary standards and community expectations.

The United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names promotes the standardisation of geographical names through comprehensive, culturally informed, evidence-based solutions. In response, the PNWG has collaboratively developed the draft of the Australian Place Naming Principles and is seeking community feedback to ensure the document is culturally appropriate and reflects community expectations.

Key stakeholders in the revision of these principles include a broad range of government agencies, community groups (with a particular focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities), and industry sectors involved in place naming and data integration. These groups include local councils, addressing authorities, tourism bodies, telecommunications companies, media organisations, scientific research institutions, emergency services, and other stakeholders. Engaging with these diverse groups is essential for ensuring that the updated principles are relevant, inclusive, and effective across different contexts and sectors.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION

The draft principles have been developed in collaboration with place naming experts from each Australian state and territory, along with representatives from the Australian Hydrographic Office, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, and the Australian Place Name Survey. As each jurisdiction in Australia has its own policies and practices for assigning official place names, the PNWG conducted open and transparent discussions to ensure that the draft principles reflect the perspectives and requirements of all regions.

In September 2024, PNWG representatives facilitated a place naming session at the National Indigenous Mapping Workshop in Perth. The workshop offered a valuable opportunity for sharing knowledge and fostering discussions about Aboriginal place naming. Insights from the session emphasised the importance of collaboration, resource accessibility, open data policies, Indigenous Data Sovereignty, and community engagement in advancing place naming efforts.

Following the National Indigenous Mapping Workshop the PNWG distributed an online survey seeking feedback on place naming matters directly from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The survey was distributed via social media channels and existing jurisdictional networks.

The PNWG is actively seeking feedback from the community and organisations involved in place naming to refine the draft Australian Place Name Principles. This consultation aims to ensure that the principles align with community values, cultural heritage, and best practices in place naming. By gathering input from diverse stakeholders, the PNWG seeks to create a document that is both practical and inclusive, supporting consistent and meaningful place

naming across Australia. Community feedback is essential to ensure the principles are fit for purpose, reflecting contemporary expectations while recognising the critical role of place names in safety, navigation, and the effective delivery of services such as emergency response and infrastructure planning.

THE AUSTRALIAN PLACE NAMING PRINCIPLES

In updating the principles, all PNWG members were surveyed to evaluate the effectiveness of the existing principles document within their jurisdiction. Based on the survey findings, members collaborated to develop a more concise and user-friendly document. This revised version clearly outlines three key principles to ensure that place naming in Australia meets both community and government expectations. The three key principles are:

1. Consistency in place naming across Australia
2. Accuracy and accessibility of place naming information
3. Promotion of connection, inclusivity, and the rights of others through place names.

The first principle emphasises the importance of using consistent language and standards for naming geographical features, roads, and localities across Australia. This consistency supports effective service delivery and community cohesion.

The second principle highlights the critical role of place names as a key descriptor in various databases, including those used by emergency services. It outlines the need for accurate, timely, and accessible naming information, particularly for places that cross jurisdictional boundaries and offshore locations. The principle also acknowledges the significance of road naming, given its direct link to addressing standards currently under revision.

The third principle recognises Australia's diverse cultural landscape, with a particular focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander place names. These names contribute to the maintenance and revitalisation of languages and cultural heritage, whether through reinstating Traditional names or creating new ones. This principle also addresses dual naming, commemorative names, unacceptable names, and the requirement for consultation to ensure names align with community expectations and do not cause offence.

Complementing the first and second principle is the development of a controlled vocabulary of geographical objects categories. This standardised vocabulary provides clear definitions across jurisdictions, ensuring consistency in naming various types of places while accommodating alternative terms.

The views of the community, government agencies and stakeholder organisations are being sought to ensure alignment of the principles and associated actions with contemporary values and practices.

CONCLUSION

The development of the Australian Place Naming Principles marks an important step toward modernising and standardising place naming practices across Australia. By fostering collaboration among government agencies, industry stakeholders, and community groups—including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives—the PNWG has ensured that the revised principles reflect contemporary expectations and best practices.

The focus on consistency, accuracy, and inclusivity strengthens place naming as a tool for effective service delivery, safety, and cultural representation. Continued engagement and feedback will ensure that the finalised principles provide a practical and adaptable document, supporting a unified approach to place naming while respecting the unique needs of diverse communities. This collaborative effort underscores the essential role of place names in shaping identity, enhancing public services, and ensuring clarity in geographical reference across Australia.

REFERENCES

Principles for the consistent use of place names (2023) ICSM Place Names Working Group. Available at: https://www.icsm.gov.au/sites/default/files/consistent_place_names_principles.pdf (Accessed: 27 January 2025).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Lisa Powell is the Place Names Manager for the Geographical Names Board NSW and Deputy Chair for the ICSM Place Names Working Group. Prior to her role with the Geographical Names Board, Lisa was a Senior Surveyor at DCS Spatial Services and managed the Survey Operations – Regional team in maintaining, preserving and improving the State’s Survey Control network. Lisa holds a Bachelor of Spatial Science Technology degree majoring in GIS and a Diploma of Spatial Information Services (Surveying). Lisa is dedicated to educating and empowering communities to actively participate in the place naming process, ensuring that Australia’s place names authentically reflect the nation's rich and diverse cultural heritage.

Mirranie (Mim) Barker is a Manager in the Lands Division of the Department of Natural Resources and Mines, Manufacturing, and Regional and Rural Development Queensland. Mirranie is responsible for the development of policy and legislation relating to land administration and use in Queensland, including on place naming. Mirranie holds a Bachelor of Applied Science, a Master of Science and several graduate diplomas and is dedicated to the development of quality, well informed public policy.

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