

Sea names and the preservation of ecosystems: An example from the United States and Canada

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe the reasons a new name has been proposed for referring collectively to the inland waters shared by the U.S. and Canada in the Pacific Northwest; it is also to describe the procedures being used to review this proposal in a cooperative way. The need for such a name stems from the fact that these waters comprise a unified and scientifically delineated ecosystem that is being carefully studied and that sustains commercial and cultural interests on both sides of the border. Having a name helps the environmental engineers share data and manage the ecosystem more effectively. At the same time, popular interest in environmental issues has increased the use of a common name. However, naming authorities have found they must cooperate closely to avoid political embarrassment.

Key Words: Management of ecosystems, standard name, meaningful associations, privileged point of view, collaborative review.

Introduction

In almost all nations, scientists, business people, and politicians are becoming increasingly aware that growing populations, the global expansion of commerce, and the ravenous exploitation of natural resources are stressing

individual ecosystems as well as our global environment. Although there has been vigorous debate, it is fair to say we are now at a point of general agreement that our economies as well as general human welfare, possibly even our very survival as a species, depends on our study, understanding, and cooperative management of individual ecosystems and, by logical extension, their global interaction.

Having a standard name for something is essential to understanding it better. A name makes it possible for people to communicate efficiently about the same object and share accumulated data and interpretations. Scientists must often coin new nomenclature in order to delineate the phenomena they study and to discuss these phenomena with others. Physicists, for example, need to identify sub-atomic particles, physicians need to identify glandular secretions, and botanists need to identify types of plants. As Carolus Linnaeus argued long ago, "if you do not know the names for things, your knowledge of them is lost"(Webber, 1). Thus, in similar fashion, it is important to the environmental scientists who study the many ecosystems of our world to have widely accepted names for the things they study. Having such names is equally important for the environmental engineers who need to cooperate for the most efficient and effective management and maintenance of individual ecosystems.

Because of the immediate and practical benefits to local economies, and/or because of international pressures, we may assume that sovereign governments will eventually address environmental needs and related onomastic issues within their own territories. However, onomastic issues may be harder to address when clearly definable ecosystems cross the territorial boundaries of sovereign governments. In such cases, interests inevitably differ in terms of such things as natural resources, rules of navigation, and the development of tourism. Names inevitably carry meaningful associations, and so difficulties can easily arise because a name privileges one set of interests or a point of view.

The purpose of this paper is to show that cooperation is better than competition, and that cooperation in the management and maintenance of ecosystems will be facilitated when the names used are mutually agreed to in a cooperative process. As an example, I shall describe the procedures being followed to consider a new name proposed for the inland sea waters shared by

the United States and Canada in the Pacific Northwest. I shall begin by describing how a variety of names evolved for different parts of the region. I will then describe how the use of one collective name arose in the scientific work of an inter-government task force and how naming authorities of both governments are now cooperating to review a formal name proposal.

History

The inland waters of the Pacific Northwest of North America embrace an area now inhabited by over seven million people and including thousands of named features. These names reflect a brief but varied history. The area was first charted by Spanish explorers. Juan Perez sailed by in 1774, saw what is now *Mt. Olympus* and named it *Sierra Nevada de Rosalia*, meaning "Snow Mountain of Saint Rosalia." In 1790, Manuel Quimper landed at what is now *New Dungeness Bay* and claimed it in the name of King Don Carlos as *Puerto de Quimper*. A methodical charting of the area was first conducted by Francisco de Eliza in 1791; his name is still used for a small flat island at the entrance to Bellingham Bay. However, most names that are still in use were bestowed by the English Captain, George Vancouver, as he sailed through these waters in 1792 and by Lt. Charles Wilkes, who charted the area in 1841 in order to establish American claims to the territory.

The entrance to these inland waters, and the largest part, is named the Strait of Juan de Fuca (or Juan de Fuca Strait, as used in Canada). The name is derived from a Greek sailing master, Apostolos Valerianos, who went by the name of Juan de Fuca while serving in the Spanish navy. He claimed to have discovered this strait in 1592 while searching for the mythical *Strait of Anian* i.e., a "Northwest Passage" from Europe to China. Whether he sailed so far north is much disputed, but the name stuck. The other major parts of these inland waters were named by Captain Vancouver. He named Puget Sound to honor his Lieutenant, Peter Puget, who sailed south to explore the area separately from the flagship and his captain. Vancouver named Hood Canal, an 80-mile salt-water canal famous for its shell fish, to honor "the Right Honourable Lord Hood, member of the British Board of Admiralty" (Hitchman, 126). And he named Georgia Strait, the major northern body of the inland waters, to honor King George III of England. Navigators used these names because Vancouver's maps superseded other maps in terms of readability. Lt.

Wilkes reaffirmed most of Vancouver's names even as he added as many other names as he could in order to support territorial claims by the United States.

Of course, traders, missionaries, and settlers added thousands of names for bays, inlets, creeks, and a variety of features, both hypsographic and hydrographic. Current maps abound in idiosyncratic names drawn from a variety of languages not only from English and other European languages, but also from Chinook Jargon, the pidgin used as a trade language inter-tribally, and from a number of the indigenous languages of the region. A few names even come from the Far East.

These names reflect both the historical development of the region and the diverse types of continuing enterprises, activities, interests, and perspectives of the people. The international border that bisects this region was drawn in 1846, a compromise engineered at a time of vigorous American expansion (see Borneman, 216-232), but for many years development continued with relatively casual attention paid to border issues. However, with burgeoning populations and accelerating development, issues such as sewage and waste disposal became increasingly important. Interest has therefore risen sharply in the management and maintenance of the shared ecosystem.

Early proposals

As early as the 1950s technical people, such as Ron Thayer while working for the agency then known as the Coast and Geodetic Survey, recognized the need to refer to the inland waters in a collective sense. Thayer noted that technical people "referred to it as the Western Sea" (Webber, 23). In 1988 at a joint meeting in Seattle of the Washington State Board on Geographic Names, the Western States Conference on Geographic Names, and the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, Harvey Manning presented a paper proposing that the inland waters of the Pacific Northwest be officially named in a collective sense as *Whulj*, a word used by Salish tribes of the Puget Sound area to refer to the large waters surrounding their villages. At that same meeting, Bert Webber first argued for the name *Salish Sea*, and in 1990 he presented a formal proposal to the Washington State Board. However, no name from any of the indigenous languages made reference to all of the inland waters in a collective sense. In the more northern area of Georgia Strait, for example, the word

Sqelateses was used for large bodies of water instead of *Whulj*. More importantly, the Washington Board found no evidence of current general use in 1990 of any collective name for the inland waters. Thus, the *Salish Sea* proposal failed to move forward because the Board did not see a need to create a usage that did not already exist.

The rise of environmental concerns

Webber's proposal was just a little ahead of its time because usage soon grew as development accelerated and environmental concerns became more prominent. In 1994 agencies of Washington State and British Columbia formed a working group to coordinate the management of transboundary natural resources. They called themselves the "Transboundary Georgia Basin–Puget Sound Environmental Indicators Working Group," and they produced a map of the inland waters to which they could refer as a unified ecosystem. By 1995 they began to refer consistently to their area of study as the Salish Sea, using the longer phrase, "Puget Sound Georgia Basin Ecosystem," primarily for their letterhead. In 2003 the name *Salish Sea* began to be used in research conferences, and in 2005 the "Transboundary . . . Working Group" entitled their research conference "Science for the Salish Sea: A sense of place, a sense of change." Similarly, their 2007 conference was entitled "Knowledge for the Salish Sea," and their 2009 conference, held in February, was entitled "The future of the Salish Sea: A call to action" (Webber, 13–16).

These inland waters are rather easily defined as an ecosystem in terms of their estuarine nature. Fresh water flows in from many streams and rivers, especially the Fraser River just north of the border, and the net movement of this surface water is toward the ocean via the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Vigorous tidal currents bring deeper ocean water in with nutrients that stimulate growth and support a rich and diverse marine ecosystem. As noted in a research study of 2006,

Approximately 220 fish species live in the shared waters. There are 26 species of ducks, 10 sub-species of geese, three species of swan four species of pinnipeds and five species of cetaceans (British Columbia/Washington State Marine Science Panel, 1994). Cultural icons such as killer whales, also called orca (*Orcinu orca*), giant Pacific octopus (*Octopus dofleini*), great blue herons (*Ardea herodias*), bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), and, of course, the anadromous Pacific

salmon (*Oncorhynchus spp.*) are well embraced in history, in the arts and in residents' consciences. (Fraser, et al, from Webber, 12)

The level of salinity in the surface water decreases as it moves toward the ocean, but marine life does not change radically through most of Juan de Fuca. Thus, the ecosystem is scientifically delineated by the flow of water from contributing watersheds and by the types of marine life supported by this particular mix of waters.

The cooperative management and maintenance of this ecosystem began as the technical mission of the "Transboundary . . . Working Group." However, it has recently become a commercial and cultural mission of many groups within the region as well, and because of its status within the Working Group and because of the linguistic need for simplicity, the name *Salish Sea* has become the dominant term of reference. The name was featured in an article in the 2007 May/June issue of *AAA Travel Magazine*, and various tourist guides and regional newspapers now use the name routinely. *Wikipedia* has an entry describing the Salish Sea, and a google search on August 1, 2009 showed over 270,000 references within 0.38 seconds. A CD of songs has been made by the Canadian musicians, Holly Arntzen and the Saltwater singers, entitled *Salish Sea*, and a video, *Song of the Salish Sea*, created for educational purposes, examines the fragile habitats that make up the ecosystem. Numerous pamphlets and web pages have also been produced for educational purposes, and two books have been published using this name in their titles (see references below). Regional Indian tribes have also jumped onto this bandwagon; at their general gatherings in 2005 and 2007 they referred to themselves as "Western Washington Tribes and British Columbia First Nations of the Salish Sea" (Webber, 24). The name itself is derived from the indigenous languages and has been long used as a generic term to refer to the family of languages and dialects originally spoken in this region (and by a few tribes east of the Cascade mountain range). The name is descriptive of all the relevant tribes and is thus historically and linguistically consonant.

Collaborative review

In light of the growing interest and use of this name, it is not surprising that Bert Webber renewed his application to have this name officially

recognized by governmental naming authorities. He officially submitted his application to the Washington Board on Geographic Names on December 5, 2008 and at about the same time had a very similar proposal submitted to the British Columbia Geographical Names Office.

The procedures for approving new name proposals differ in Canada and the United States, and the coordination of these procedures is a delicate and important task. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, names usually privilege one set of interests and/or a point of view. In addition, politicians have a duty to protect and preserve the interests of all their citizens, and to do so they need to maintain their apparent authority and not concede that authority to someone else. Thus, cooperation among the staffs of agencies dealing with name approval is essential so that each sovereign entity might share all the relevant documents, adjudicate the proposal independently, and render a decision without appearing to preempt the authority of the other sovereign entity.

Successful cooperation first requires that people feel the need to have a common standard name for a feature. In this case that need arose from environmental concerns. Second, the staffs of the naming authorities need to communicate openly and thoroughly before the naming authorities take final action. For the staffs to move forward in their cooperation, it is also essential that they believe the proposed name is neutral, that it does not privilege one point of view. Finally, they must believe that the proposal is well documented and will meet the criteria of their naming authorities, i.e., that the proposal will be successful with all naming authorities, and that no naming authority will be embarrassed by another.

Up to this time, cooperation between the staffs of the Washington Board, the British Columbia Geographical Names Office, the U.S. Board, and the Geographical Names Board of Canada has been thorough and meticulous. The proposal itself (to recognize the name *Salish Sea* officially as a collective reference to the inland waters) and supporting documents have, of course, been distributed to each of these naming authorities. In addition, comments have been solicited from as many political, civic, commercial, and tribal groups that might have relevant interests on either side of the border. The staff people in Washington State and British Columbia shared their lists of such organizations. Although the proposal came to Washington Board first, the British Columbia

Office has handled the printing and mailing of the questionnaires. Throughout this process, the staff people of all four offices conferred frequently with one another and on three occasions joined together in conference calls (coordinated by the Canadian Names Board) to discuss details.

Timing is an important issue. The Canadian Names Board meets with provincial authorities in August 2009 (once per year), and if the comments from political, civic, commercial, and tribal groups on both sides of the border are generally positive, the names office in British Columbia will recommend its approval of this proposal, a decision that their national Board cannot countermand but must record. Assuming that the action is positive, there is still a question about how the recommendation will be phrased. It might be phrased in such a way that the action is not considered official until the U.S. Board acts, but such phrasings might be interpreted as implying the subordination of the Canadian Board, to which elected officials would strongly object.

Timing would be much less of an issue if the Boards themselves (the naming authorities) could meet simultaneously. However, the Washington Board cannot meet until October 30, and the U.S. Board will meet soon thereafter in November. To mitigate the possibility of a political backlash, the staff people on all sides hope to have each of the naming authorities adjudicate the proposal independently, but not to release minutes of the meetings until after the meeting of the U.S. Board. Immediately thereafter there may be a joint announcement and press release from the elected officials who have authority over the naming authorities probably the Premier of British Columbia and the Commissioner of Public Lands in the State of Washington.

Conclusion

As suggested at the beginning of this paper, onomastic issues may be full of political peril when features cross the territorial boundaries of sovereign governments. If successful, the approval of the name *Salish Sea* to refer to the inland waters of the Pacific Northwest will illustrate the importance of having a name with which to refer to objects of study especially the ecosystems that sustain our economies, our cultures, and ultimately our very lives. It will also illustrate the importance 1) of having a broad, popular interest in the management and maintenance of such ecosystems, 2) of finding a name that

does not privilege one point of view, and 3) of the cooperation and mutual respect among people working with names.

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