

NATIVE CLAIMS AND PLACE NAMES IN CANADA'S WESTERN ARCTIC

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

The federal government requires agreement by Native groups about areas of overlapping land use prior to the settlement of comprehensive land claims in the Northwest Territories. Research into toponomy (place names) proved useful in documentary Dene/Métis patterns of distribution, although Inuvialuit data was less complete.

Le gouvernement fédéral exige un accord des groupes autochtones sur les régions où l'emploi du terrain se chevauche avant le règlement des revendications complètes du terrain aux Territoires du Nord-Ouest. L'étude de la toponymie s'est révélée utile dans la documentation des modes de distribution Dene/Métis bien que l'information sur les Inuvialuit ait été moins complète.

Toponymy, the study of place names of a region, is not one of the better known subjects for either laymen or academics. Place names are taken for granted by most. Indispensable for establishing geographic points of reference, they may reflect significant features and functions but often only a momentary whim, and their permanency may outlast the original *raison d'être* or be very short lived. The Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names with its Ottawa-based Secretariat is charged with ultimate responsibility to co-ordinate and direct the correct usage of Canadian place names, with the provinces having authority within their own boundaries. Despite the basic importance of the work, financial support for it is still modest with the notable exception of Quebec. A professional cadre is developing however. One may note the Canadian Society for the Study of Names, originally established in 1966, and its journal *Onomastica Canadiana*, the journal *Canoma* published by the C.P.C.G.N. Secretariat, and the fine publications of the *Commission de toponomie* of Quebec. A recent blossoming of place name books across Canada and the introduction of a regular "Names and Places" feature in the *Canadian Geographic* are indicators of a growing public interest in the subject.

Indigenous place names play a distinctive role in most countries. As Rayburn has noted, "No place names distinguish a country better than those of native origin" (Rayburn, 1984/85, 68). Four of our provinces as well as the nation as a whole enjoy such distinction and are a matter of satisfaction and pride to all Canadians. In southern Canada however, the map reveals a clear dominance of European place names, for a variety of reasons. Though the Initial explorers often applied such names to significant features, later explorers and fur traders were dependent upon assistance and support from the Native peoples as they ventured across the continent. Freeman (1985) has shown that in many, if not most cases, fur traders used indigenous place names to identify prominent natural features in the Western Interior, even if the trading posts themselves usually bore European names.

Indigenous place names do remain in southern Canada, often a "Europeanized" version, but certainly are not the most widespread. As settlers took up permanent occupancy European names came to dominate. In some cases the settlers had little if any communication with the indigenous people, in some cases they found the aboriginal names difficult to pronounce. In many cases they sought to retain a tie with the home country by transferring familiar place names or by honouring influential persons. In some instances religious persuasion of the settlers was a major factor in selection of a name for the European settlement.

On today's maps it is the North where place names are thinnest in numbers. Modern advances in surveying, including air photos and satellite im-

agery, have eliminated the former blank areas on northern maps, but many features appear unnamed. Until recently the general naming procedures followed the earlier pattern of southern Canada: when it became necessary for a feature to be identified, for economic, political, or other reasons, a European name usually was applied. In reality many such features already were known to the indigenous peoples of the area and identified by them with names. Fortunately the situation has been corrected and authorities at all levels now make every effort to ensure that indigenous place names are respected as an important element in Native culture.

However important place names may be regarded by toponymists, by some few other specialists or currently by some indigenous peoples, it must be conceded that the general public gives them little thought. Research into the topic is considered esoteric at best and probably by many as of little practical use if not a waste of money. My purpose here is to acknowledge that on the contrary, such research often has important and very practical use in addition to its general cultural value. Specifically, it proved most helpful in the matter of overlapping Native land use and occupancy recently in Canada's Western Arctic.

By 1983 there still had been no agreement reached between the four Native associations of the Northwest Territories (the Dene Nation, the Metis Association of the N.W.T., the Committee for Original Peoples' Entitlement, and the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut) in the matter of overlapping areas of land use and occupancy. Such agreement was a pre-requisite of the Government of Canada for settlement of any comprehensive Native land claims. The associations had held discussions on an on again/off again basis for some years but without reaching agreement. Finally in September 1983, with consent of all parties, I was appointed "factfinder" to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, to research and determine Native land use and occupancy in the area as part of a process to resolve the overlap problem. Major emphasis was to be placed upon existing documentary evidence supplemented by first hand local input where desirable, though the five-month time frame permitted was disconcertingly short. The report was forwarded to the Minister on January 20, 1984 (Wonders, 1984).

The Western Arctic/Lower Mackenzie sector was and is the area of most extensive overlap in the Northwest Territories. The Dene and Metis regarded it as of top priority even to the point of trying to have the investigation restrict itself to this area, a request rejected as it was contrary to the agreed-upon terms of reference. The much greater economic development in the Mackenzie Delta and the oil and gas activity in the Beaufort Sea make this area particularly important. It also is the most complex ethnically, with large num-

bers of all major groups intermingled and increasingly intermarrying. In 1978 the Federal Government and the Inuvialuit (C.O.P.E.) had signed an Agreement in Principle towards a comprehensive and claims settlement and the boundaries thus delineated greatly alarmed the Dene/Metis (Figure 1). They believed that their traditional rights were threatened within parts of the area involved, despite reassurances by the Inuvialuit.

In examining available existing relevant documentary materials, indigenous place names provided valuable insight to overall land use and occupancy by the Native peoples in this particular area. Other types of material of course were significant, but I here am acknowledging the very great usefulness of the work of toponym specialists.

At the time that the investigation was undertaken there were four major sources of indigenous toponym available for the area involved. These were the journals and the analyses of the journals of Father Emile Petitot, the 19th century missionary; the work of anthropologist Cornelius Osgood; the work of linguist John T. Ritter; and current research into Dene place names based at Fort Good Hope, Colville Lake, and Fort Franklin, N.W.T. The presence of the Dene Mapping Project headed up by my anthropology colleague Michael Asch on the University of Alberta campus greatly facilitated access to the latter material. The informative special "Arctic Archaeology" issue of *The Musk-Ox* with Hanks and Winter's "Dene Names" article (1983) for example, had not yet been distributed.

A major gap existed in the indigenous place names of this particular area. Except for limited treatment by Petitot, Inuvialuit toponymy had been almost entirely neglected by researchers. The interpretive results accordingly are really an indication of the extent of Dene/Metis presence in the overlap area but without comparable toponymic information for the Inuvialuit (though other sources of information on the latter people's presence is available). As noted previously however, the former group felt the urgent need to demonstrate its presence within part of the designated "Traditional Inuvialuit Lands" according to the Agreement in Principle.

Castonguay (1979) and Castonguay and Lester (1980) have analyzed the writings of Father Petitot as to their toponymic content. They acknowledge that his collection of Native place names is not exhaustive and that it does not represent the total number of such names in use at the time, but they believe that it is a reliable indicator of Native land use. The relatively few Inuvialuit place names reflect the much greater contact of Petitot with the various Dene groups than with the Inuvialuit, but the basic pattern revealed in the distribution is significant.

Exclusively Inuvialuit place names prevail in the Mackenzie Delta and as far upriver as the Lower Ramparts, above present-day Arctic Red River.

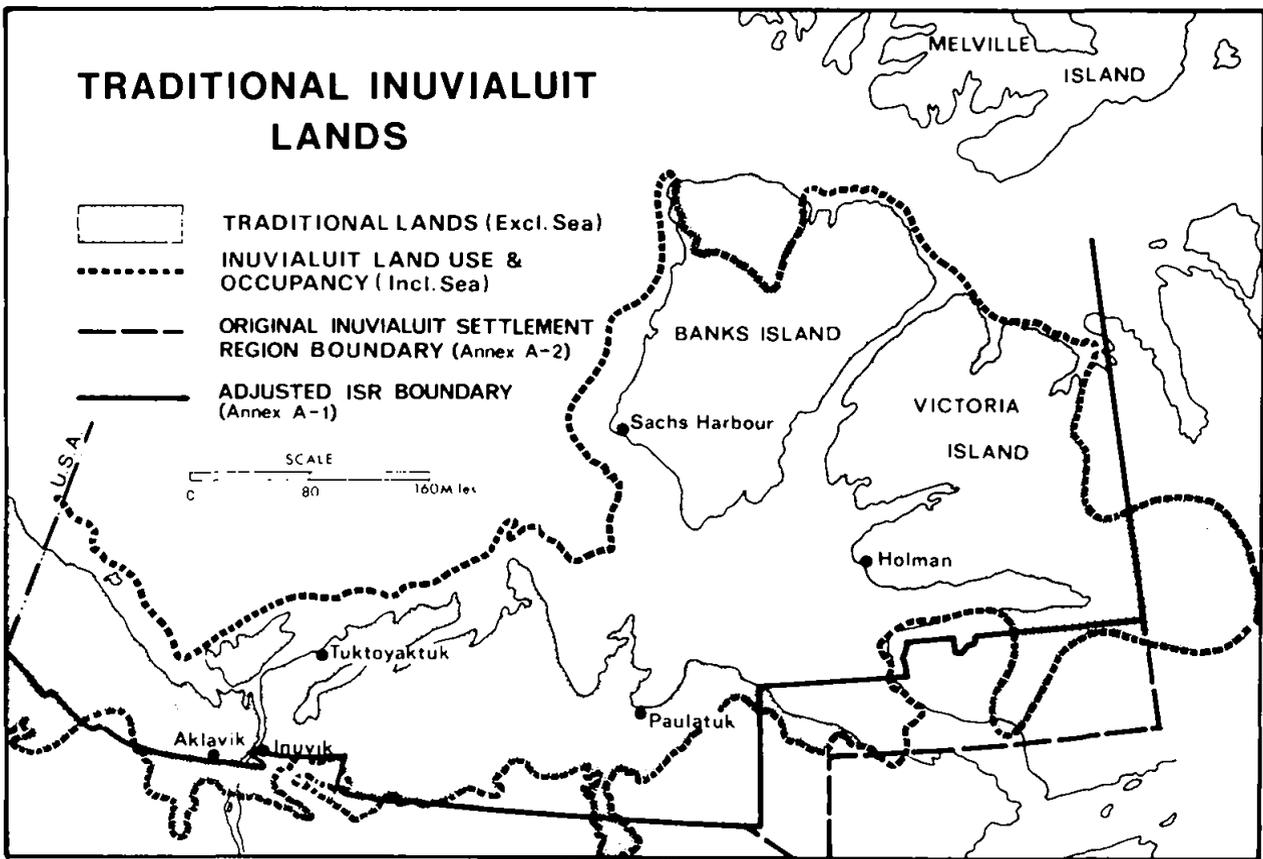


Figure 1

At the Lower Ramparts both Inuvialuit and Dene place names for the same features are recorded. Only Dene place names are recorded upriver. While only Dene place names are recorded on the Peel River and west of the Delta, joint Inuvialuit-Dene place names are noted for the Richardson Mountains west of the Delta and for the Peel River above Fort McPherson.

Eastwards, joint Inuvialuit-Dene names are recorded for the lower Anderson River and Horton River. The concentration of exclusively Dene place names west of the Horton River stops short of the Arctic coast but extends west as far as the Mackenzie Delta beyond Sitidgi and Campbell Lakes. One isolated Dene place name occurs north of Parsons Lake and south of the site of the Inuviatuit village of Kittigazuit, at the base of the Tuktoyaktuk Peninsula. Dene toponyms for "Arctic Ocean" are documented from both Fort Franklin and Fort Good Hope.

Osgood's map of Bearlake Indian place names (1975) based on his 1928 research in the area for the National Museum of Canada, shows a general encirclement of the lake and close similarity with the pattern of Dene place names collected recently by the Fort Franklin people. The presence of Dene names in the northeast area of Great Bear Lake is particularly significant in terms of Inuit overlap from the Arctic coast. Osgood notes Dene toponyms for the Coppermine River, for the Arctic Ocean, and for Dismal Lakes where "in this area the Indians occasionally came into contact with Eskimo" (Osgood, 1975:532), and he comments that Stick Island in Dease River was used by both Indian and Eskimo hunting parties.

Ritter's work with the Kutchin people of the Dene (n.d) provided 680 indigenous place names within the N.W.T. and maps supplied by the Dene Mapping Project fixed their location. This information was incorporated with other to produce Figure 2. Relatively few Dene place names were noted by Ritter in the Mackenzie Delta. (Most of the Delta names shown on Figure 2 have been provided to me more recently by Dene living in Fort McPherson and Aklavik.) "This situation" as he commented, "is explained by the fact that movement into the Mackenzie Delta and exploitation of the resources of the lower Peel (by Kutchin) are both relatively recent phenomena, whereas the upper Peel regions have no doubt been inhabited for many generations" (Ritter, n.d.:129).

Dene place names are being compiled currently by Native organizations in Fort Good Hope, Colville Lake, and Fort Franklin. These include a wide variety of types of place names, including topographic features, places of important religious or historical significance, former hunting constructions (e.g. fence-lines) etc. As the primary interest in my work was the overall areal extent, the various Dene categories provided by their organizations and the Dene Mapping Project have been combined by me into community-based designations as shown in Figure 2.

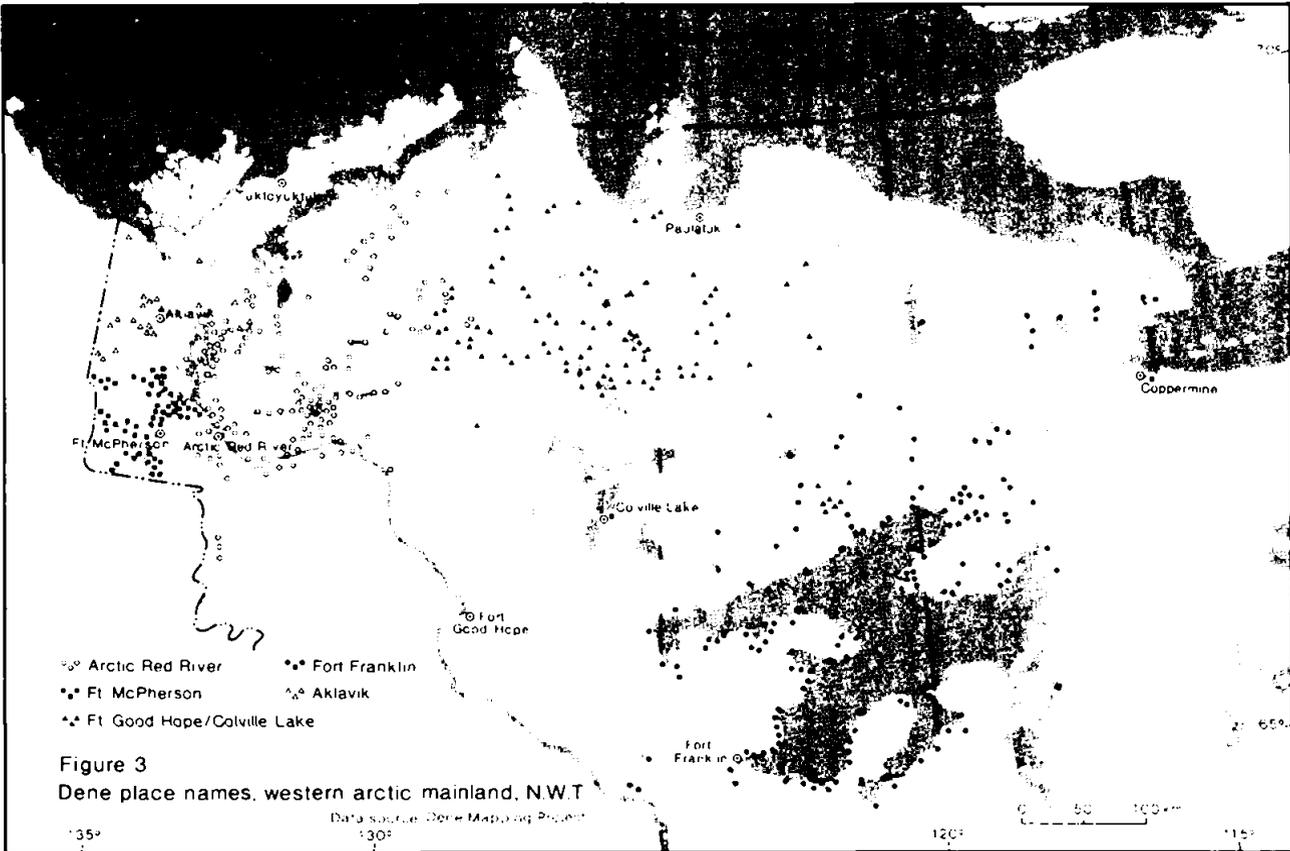


Figure 2

Overall there is remarkable agreement between this composite map of Dene place names and the map based upon Petitot's work. The Fort Franklin people's names range northeastward to smaller lakes south of Cape Hope. Fort Good Hope/Colville Lake people's names extend westwards from the Hornaday River in a few cases, but mainly from the Horton River. They are particularly numerous throughout the Anderson River area and extend west to the Crossley Lakes north of the Wolverine River and along the Carnwath River.

Arctic Red River place names occur through the eastern part of the Mackenzie Delta about as far north as Inuvik, thence eastwards around Campbell and Sitidgi Lakes, along the Miner and Kugaluk Rivers with some evidence even along the lower Smoke River. They extend eastwards to merge with the Fort Good Hope/Colville Lake names along the Wolverine River and around the Crossley Lakes.

Fort McPherson place names are particularly numerous along the Peel River and its western tributaries, Rat River and Stony Creek, leading through the Richardson Mountains. Kutchin place names occur through the western channels of the Mackenzie Delta. Local informants also reported some in the western Delta to an area northwest of Aklavik, with a wider dispersal over the higher land immediately to the west, and extending into the northern Yukon.

It is clear that Dene place names do occur extensively within the areas designated as "traditional Inuvialuit lands" in parts of the mainland in the Western Arctic and lower Mackenzie Valley area, thereby substantiating the Dene's claim to a traditional presence within parts of those areas. The Mackenzie Delta initially seems to have been used seasonally at least by Inuvialuit, who focussed primarily on the coast. Not until the present century did both Inuvialuit and Dene move into the Delta on a permanent basis. Only when Inuvialuit place name analysis is available will it be possible to make a comparable evaluation of the southward occupancy of the Inuvialuit with the northward occupancy by Dene in the overlap areas.

As a footnote it may be noted that priority discussions took place between Inuvialuit and Dene/Metis during the late stages of the report preparation and immediately afterwards. The contending Native parties were able to resolve their differences in that area, thereby making possible a satisfactory completion of the first Comprehensive Native Land Claim Settlement in the Northwest Territories. In March 1984 Cabinet approved "The Western Claim" agreement and it was ratified in Parliament in June 1984 (Anonymous, 1984). It is not unreasonable to suggest that research into indigenous place names contributed significantly to a more accurate understanding of the Native people's presence in the Western Arctic and to a fairer

permanent solution in the overlap areas.

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