Indigenous Place Names & Language Revitalization

“Our place names are holders of story, history, teachings, events – our collective and individual intimate connections and interaction with place... It is time to find these names, learn them, and saturate our homelands with our peoples, our languages and our ceremonies.” - Leanne Simpson

PLACE NAMES AS IDENTITY

Language, sacred history, ceremonial cycle and place are all interwoven and dependent on one another to unify a people. A sense of place plays a critical part in forming our sense of self and community. Language of place is a dialogue with the land; surfacing from direct interaction with the physical environment. Indigenous place names hold stories of identity: spiritually, governmentally, and epistemically. Each particular story entails ongoing lived relationships which contain past events, and make up a larger mnemonic ‘mythscape' or 'language play'. Holding these stories of direct relationship demonstrates an occupancy in the land which counters the mindset of ‘Terra Nullius' and illustrates Indigenous presence.

POST-COLONIAL GEOGRAPHY

Creating a post-colonial geography requires translation and bridging between different spatial knowledge traditions, and often Indigenous geographies are forced to fit a top-down colonial cartography. There is also a risk that artificially fixed ‘culture maps' may pedestalize, essentialize, and ‘Other' Indigenous people, while simultaneously denying political agency. In the case of the Salish Sea eco-zone the impetus came from scientists, and ultimate authority led in colonial naming boards. All of this means that creating a truly post-colonial geography requires acknowledging the stories, as well as recognizing the spiritual, governmental, and resource-based values of Indigenous geographies.

HAIDA GWAIKI - Resource map

The Haïda have demonstrated occupancy and asserted sovereignty through place naming and mapping. Decades of resistance to colonial authority, in part led to the 2010 ‘giving back’ of the name “Queen Charlotte Islands” and the legitimation of a toponym which speaks to Haïda self-identity and strengthens relationship to the land and seascapes. Though this act was authorized in far detached government offices, and may serve the continuance of provincial and federally drawn colonial cartography, the e has been great headway in localizing decision making and resource management. The “Ocean & Way of Life” map (left) visualizes some stories that have developed from the interactions of the Haïda people on their land and utilizes the Haïda language to blend resource mapping and cultural mapping.

Place must inform policy.

By transforming our language of geography we can acknowledge and respect Indigenous presence and sovereignty in the land. It will further create accessible venues of interest and learning of First Nations language, stories, and world-views.