PAN AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY
REPORT OF THE TWENTIETH GEOGRAPHIC NAMES COURSE
José Joaquín Hungría Morell Geographic Names Course
Quito, Ecuador
31 March – 11 April 2008

The José Joaquín Hungría Morell Geographic Names Course, offered under the auspices of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH), was held in Quito, Ecuador from 31 March through 11 April 2008. The Instituto Geografíco Militar served as host and provided excellent training facilities and administrative support. The course was also scheduled to coincide with the 80th anniversary of the establishment of the Instituto Geografíco Militar, and was part of the numerous celebration events.

The importance of applied toponymy is evident worldwide, and has been noted to be essential in local, regional, and national planning as well as emergency response and preparedness, national security, environmental analysis, and a variety of similar applications. In short, standardization of geographic names is a major factor in support of a nation's spatial data infrastructure. The two-week course is designed to provide an introduction and basis for national standardization of geographic names and a program of applied toponymy. The first week is predominately lecture and addresses various aspects of applied toponymy, and concentrates heavily upon all requirements involved in establishing a program of national standardization, while exploring conventional and alternate methods of achieving this goal. A comprehensive field exercise offers students the opportunity of actual data gathering, processing, and analyzing in accordance with established toponymic field procedures. The second week of the course is devoted to a workshop in automated data processing where the student designs databases and files, as well as acquires the ability to retrieve and analyze toponymic data in a microprocessing environment. Finally, there is an exercise where a names staff interacts with a national names authority in applying principles and policies of standardization.

The twentieth course was comprised of 19 students from Ecuador. As requested, and as desired, the students represented a mixture from the various agencies of the National government. This version of the course was altered somewhat in some modules and significantly in some modules because it was clear that the level of progress in Ecuador toward establishing a program of national names standardization was beyond the introductory stage. Further, the level of expertise and understanding regarding automation in general, and specifically database design and data manipulation was in almost every case at the intermediary level or higher.

The module where development of principles, polices, and procedures of standardization is introduced was altered to analyze, discuss, and refine the material already developed in Ecuador, and to proceed to the next level of implementation. The course and its presence served to coordinate the efforts of those seeking to implement such policies and procedures and seeking to establish a national committee, as well as to stimulate those in policy making positions into action. It seems apparent that as a result of the course, there

will likely be a formalization of geographic names activities and cooperation throughout the National government. The Instituto Geografíco Militar (the national mapping agency) is in a leadership role in implementing the establishment of a national program of geographic names standardization as well as poised to formalize that program throughout the National government. Also, the Instituto has completed the design, development, and implementation of a national geographic names database that can and will likely serve as the one vehicle for official geographic names in Ecuador with full partnership participation from throughout the National government by those agencies and individuals responsible for geographic names activities.

Also, the automation workshop was accelerated to be commensurate with the overall more advanced level of the students regarding database design and associated functions. Some functionality not normally presented was discussed.

As ever, while the course has evolved into a well-structured set of seven inter-related modules, it continues to be an excellent forum for sharing common problems and defining solutions. Importantly, differences and commonalities between and among various agencies were discussed and solutions offered. The team of three instructors from the USA, Mexico, and Honduras are well versed in team teaching, and the course, recognized by the United Nations Geographic Names Training Committee, is easily altered to address, as in this case, specific needs and requirements. Some modules remained introductory, but some were elevated beyond the introductory level. Even though some material was altered to be more than introductory, it remains clear from the primary topic of evaluation there is need for more time specifically in one or more particular modules. However it is also apparent from this and previous courses that positive results are accomplished by documented establishment of principles and policies as well as by an even more prevalent implementation of procedures and variations of procedures examined by the course. In numerous countries, programs and procedures have been established and existing programs have been modified and enhanced.

Several recent major enhancements to the course were expanded and refined, mostly in the automation module, but in addition there were updates to the lectures to reflect the changing role of support from the names layer in a national spatial data environment, and the increasing requirements for digital mapping, both general and thematic. Also, instruction in use and data mining on the Internet is now a standard part of the instruction. The students were introduced to the goal of collecting data, extant and otherwise, with which to build a digital gazetteer for Latin America, a project once again gaining momentum. Such a digital gazetteer should ultimately lead to an integrated database of standardized geographic names to support national and global spatial data infrastructures as well as individual national map programs. The students should have acquired from this course the necessary skills and expertise to support the goals and milestones of a potential integrated digital gazetteer for Latin America.

As usual, conclusions indicate that there is a high level of interest in this course and it is well received. While there are variable levels of expertise among the students, each demonstrates a high degree of enthusiasm, and clearly proficiency in general and specific computer skills have increased greatly. Repeatedly, we suggest that based upon the course's success and composition, PAIGH should explore the possibility of offering some

level of official credit for participants. Certainly, it is apparent that the course achieves its stated goals and should be continued.

Respectfully submitted,

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