

Report of the Pan American Institute of Geography & History Cartographic Commission

The primary focus of the geographical names activities of the Pan American Institute on Geography & History since the last UNGEGN Conference has been directed toward preparations to present the courses in applied toponymy (geographical names) annually. Therefore much time has been spent in research and action to assure the course is current with regard to the most up-to-date methods of geographical names standardization and processing. A major effort during the course each year is devoted to assuring that the automation module is absolutely current regarding new technical developments for application and development, and to make sure the students are at least introduced to the latest in relational database design and development (often with individual instruction because of the varying levels of expertise in database design and skills in automated data processing), but every student receives the required instruction.

The twenty-first José Joaquín Hungría Morell Geographical Names Course in applied toponymy offered under the auspices of the Pan American Institute of Geography & History is scheduled to be presented in October at the Instituto Geográfico Nacional in Spain. This is a departure from normal procedure in that the course has always been (until now) presented in a member State of the Pan American Institute. The presentation this year will be in Spain by special request of the Instituto Geográfico Nacional and approved by the Secretary General of the Pan American Institute, and is evidence of the close cooperation between the Latin American Community and the mapping institute in Spain.

Since the last UNGEGN session, there has been one course presented; the twentieth. The geographical names course in applied toponymy was held in Quito, Ecuador from 31 March through 11 April 2008. The Instituto Geográfico 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 Geográfico Militar, and was part of the numerous celebration events.

The twentieth course was comprised of 19 students from numerous agencies of the Ecuador national government and the military as well as academia. 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, policies, 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. The Instituto Geográfico Militar (the national mapping agency) is in a leadership role in implementing the establishment of a national program of geographical 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 geographical names database that can and will likely serve as the one vehicle for official geographical names in Ecuador with full partnership participation from throughout the National government by those agencies and individuals responsible for geographical 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 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

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. Movement toward production of such a digital gazetteer ultimately should promote development and implementation of an integrated database of standardized geographical names to support national and global spatial data infrastructures as well as individual national map programs.

A secondary function of the Working Group has been to encourage and support by whatever means the work of the Latin American Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). Assistance includes counseling and training other countries in developing principles, policies, and procedures for internal use in standardizing geographical names. Since countries have specific and special problems, (even within a specific geographical area or linguistically related group), general advice is often tailored to individual needs.

Throughout each year, the members of the working group collaborate on all issues of importance regarding geographical names throughout the member States of PAIGH, and offer consultation to others if approached. One goal of the Working Group is to establish an integrated data system for geographical names for the Latin American community.

The course has concentrated in cultivating an environment for implementation (eventually) of this integrated geographical names system, which will be a seamless application available to all, and serve as an automated names system of official names, and which the primary purpose is to solve problems before they can inhibit other major projects or to cause loss of the allocation of valuable resources.

So, in summary, almost all of the available time of the Working Group is devoted to keeping the annual geographical names course current and meaningful, technically and otherwise, and which includes all aspects of the goal of a seamless, integrated geographical names network for the Latin American community specifically in support of national and regional spatial data infrastructures (and any other applications from the user community that are needed and warranted). Remaining time is allocated to support for the Latin American Division of UNGEGN and its work.

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