

WRITTEN PUBLIC COMMENT

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON RECONCILIATION IN PLACE NAMES
MEETING OF DECEMBER 7 & 8, 2022

- **STARLYN MILLER - THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY**
- **EDEN GOSTELOW**
- **RAMYA RAMAKRISHNAN - HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION (submitted after meeting)**
- **WILLIAM WEI (submitted after meeting)**



December 8, 2022

Joshua Winchell
Staff Director
National Park System Advisory Board
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Mr. Winchell and the Members of the Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names:

On behalf of our more than one million members and supporters, The Wilderness Society writes to ask that you please accept the attached statement of support and recommendations for action for the Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names in their first meeting on December 7 and 8, 2022. We respectfully request that this letter be included in committee record.

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

Starlyn Miller

Starlyn Miller (Little Shell Chippewa/Menominee/Mohican) J.D.
Native Lands Partnership Director
The Wilderness Society



Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names
December 8, 2022 Public Comment

The Wilderness Society's
Statement of Support and Recommendations for Action

The Wilderness Society celebrates the establishment of the Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names by Secretary Haaland and offers its full support to the appointed members of this Committee. To each Advisory Committee member, we congratulate you and look forward to the bright future your role will undoubtedly facilitate in confronting derogatory place names in helping our Nation to heal from its past.

The Wilderness Society believes that the names we give to natural places and geographic features like parks, mountains, and lakes matter. Many place names across the U.S. are derogatory and hurtful and create an unwelcome environment on our public lands. We believe that public lands should be welcoming and inclusive of all people and that addressing racist and offensive place names is an important step in creating a more welcoming environment.

The scope of this problem is significant. There are a large number of derogatory names on public lands, including those that honor Confederate leaders, perpetrators of atrocities against Indigenous people and historical figures with repugnant racial views, and racial or sexual slurs or are otherwise offensive. TWS and others have conducted extensive research and documented hundreds to thousands of such names. We will be happy to share the results of this research with Committee members. TWS will also work in close coordination with tribal and civil rights partners and others to develop recommendations to the Committee on existing names that are derogatory and should be replaced. In doing so, we recognize the need to honor Native American connections to these places and return Native names wherever possible as seen appropriate by all affiliated Tribal Nations and indigenous communities.

In addition to addressing existing derogatory and offensive names on public lands, we urge the Committee to recognize the need for structural changes in the naming process. The current process is too slow, lacks transparency, and does not welcome public involvement. Further, even though the Board of Geographic Names is a federal agency charged with establishing uniform names for federal use, the current process effectively defers to states by giving them veto power over naming decisions. As a result of these shortcomings, racist and offensive names stay on the landscape. The process must be reformed to be more inclusive, equitable, transparent, and open to the public. We look forward to supporting communities and individuals in putting forth proposals to this



Committee to improve the existing antiquated name change process so that access to systems is never a barrier to equity, justice, and collective healing.

Finally, we urge the Committee to take a proactive role in the process for selecting new names for features on public lands. This work is an important complement to the **Committee's work to address existing names. As new locations are named on public lands,** the Committee should use its position to steer the naming process towards equity, justice, and recognition and consultation of the original inhabitants to these places. Let the mirror **of our Nation's place names work reconcile our history, respond to the call at present for equity, justice, and healing, and bestow upon all eyes the future's beauty, strength, and resiliency of our Nation's diversity.**

To whom it may concern,

My name is Eden Gostelow and I am a student of Anthropology at the University of Vermont. After reading about the efforts of the Advisory Committee on the Reconciliation in Place Names and Secretary of The Interior Deb Haaland, to declare the word “squaw” to be derogatory, and to scrub the term clean from over 650 geographical locations, I was inspired to write to you with my opinion.

The names of places and how we refer to things can carry extraordinary power and sentiment, which is why it is so important for us to use that power for good – to spread knowledge, understanding, and respect. Changing and modifying place names is not only about some people being offended, but it’s also about telling a more complete history of the United States by respecting Indigenous knowledge and acknowledging that a vast population, with dense history and culture, inhabited the land before colonizers arrived, and continue to do so. The predominance of European-American place names completely erases the histories of the Indigenous peoples who were here for millennia before colonizers forced them off their lands. It relegates Native Americans to a bygone era in a world that has evolved without them, as the only remaining trace of their culture has been shunned from public view or commodified.

Restoring Indigenous place and cultural names helps to restore spiritual connections to place, culture and ancestral knowledge. For a people that are becoming increasingly invisible in modern society, increasing awareness is essential. For example, the term “Anasazi” began use in 1927 in archaeological Pecos Classification system to refer to the Ancestral Pueblo people who spanned the present-day Four Corners region of the US. However, the term in its native Navajo origin means “ancient enemy.” The Pueblo peoples of the Southwest understandably do not wish to refer to their ancestors in such a disrespectful manner, so in pursuit of accuracy and respect, the term Anasazi was recognized as unacceptable and is no longer in use. The correct term to use now is “Ancestral Pueblo” or “Ancestral Puebloan.” The same goes for the term “squaw”. It will take great effort to remove this word from geographical locations, but it is a necessary change.

However, derogatory place names in the US go beyond hurting just Indigenous peoples, as places like “Chinaman Gulch” and “Negro Mesa” still exist in Colorado. This shows that change needs to happen on a much broader scale. A recent study published in *People and Nature* showed that, within 16 national parks that were studied, some of which being the nation’s most popular: Acadia, Yosemite, and Canyonlands, 21 places were named for proponents of racism and 52 places were named for settlers who were involved in known acts of racial violence and genocide, often against Indigenous peoples.

Visitors come from around the world to revere the National Parks of the United States, which have been called “America’s best idea,” for their majestic landscapes and unique wildlife. But what kind of impression do you think it leaves visitors with, or what values would they think that us as American’s hold when you still have places like Hayden Valley in Yellowstone - named for Ferdinand Hayden, a geologist who wrote that unless Native Americans were forcefully assimilated, “they must ultimately be exterminated.” What it tells them is who belongs and who doesn’t.

Another example is Mount Evans, one of Colorado’s famed “fourteeners” on the front range of the Rocky Mountains. It is a tourist attraction with the highest paved road in North America, receiving over 200,000 visitors per year. It is named after John Evans, who was the territorial governor of Colorado at the time of the Sand Creek Massacre, an unprovoked attack by U.S. soldiers in 1864 on Cheyenne and Arapaho people in southeastern Colorado. Their chiefs had negotiated a truce with army commanders that they believed protected them. Instead, soldiers attacked their peaceful

encampment and slaughtered some 230 people, most of them women and children. John Evans, who had issued proclamations “to go in pursuit of all hostile Indians [and] kill and destroy all enemies of the country”, was forced to resign following the massacre. Otto Braided Hair, a member of the Montana-based Northern Cheyenne Tribe, whose ancestors survived the massacre, said that the current name “is an insult to our people,” and “It is a constant reminder to my family and the families of other Sand Creek Massacre descendants that the crime of Sand Creek is, in a way, condoned by the people of Colorado and the nation.” This is the legacy we leave upon the land.

The Issue of derogatory place names, both direct – the name contains the racist term, and indirect – the name is named after a person who supported racist ideology, is a system-wide pattern in need of a system-wide response. I understand that the wheels of bureaucracy often run at a turtle’s pace, but the energy that Secretary Haaland has expressed in accelerating the removal of “squaw” from location names around the country is the urgency that we need. Under the current process, renaming locations with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names can take years, as they can offer significant deference to states who approach the task with wide variation. Most state bodies consist of only few people, and North Dakota has no active board at all. We must ensure that at a state and federal level, there are sufficient resources to be able to handle a system-wide response.

The work of the advisory community is inspiring and sincerely appreciated. I hope that you continue to take public voices, like mine, into account when fulfilling your duty to end the perpetuating legacies of oppression that inhabit our country.

HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION

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Dec. 08, 2022

Good afternoon,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Ramya Ramakrishnan and I am the Director of Community Outreach at the Hindu American Foundation - a non-partisan, national nonprofit 501(c) 3 organization that has advocated for the Hindu American community for 20 years. Changing derogatory names is very important and it is truly reassuring to note that a committee tasked with such an effort exists. This committee also has a huge responsibility in parallel which is to make sure that it does NOT inadvertently identify certain names as derogatory based on inaccurate information that is widespread.

Today, I want to shed light on the name **Swastika** which is wrongly believed to be a derogatory name, when in reality the meaning of the word Swastika in Sanskrit, (one of the oldest languages of the world) means good existence. Swastika is a symbol of auspiciousness and good fortune for the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Zoroastrian communities worldwide who make up over 1.5 billion of the world's population, and is displayed at places of worship, homes, businesses, printed materials, vehicles etc. by these four faith groups. The Swastika has been around for over 5,000 years as a symbol of peace and prosperity. The Nazis called their emblem Hakenkreuz, which was incorrectly translated to the word "swastika" rather than what it actually means in English - "Hooked Cross". The designs of the hateful Nazi emblem Hakenkreuz and the Swastika are not identical and look different. In 2008, at the second Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit, a resolution formally recognized the long positive history of the Swastika. It was recognized that this symbol is, and has been sacred to Hindus for millennia, long before its misappropriation."

If the goal of this national committee is to embrace diversity, be inclusive and equitable, every effort must be made to preserve the name Swastika and to educate the public about the rich history behind this sacred symbol. There is an active proposal to rename Swastika Mountain in Oregon because of inaccurate information filed by a community member who initiated the name change. The current process of deferring to states unilaterally must be changed to encourage organizations and the public to comment on state naming and renaming decisions. I hope that this committee adheres to its mission of making sure that public land names are welcoming and inclusive of everyone. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for the important work you do.

Thank you.

Ramya Ramakrishnan

Community Outreach Director, Hindu American Foundation

From: William Wei <william.wei@colorado.edu>

Sent: Thursday, December 15, 2022 12:55 PM

To: NPS Reconciliation in Place Names Committee <reconciliation_committee@nps.gov>

Cc: re-envisioning-denvers-historic-chinatown-project@googlegroups.com <re-envisioning-denvers-historic-chinatown-project@googlegroups.com>

Subject: [EXTERNAL] Eliminating the name "Chinaman" from geographic sites

Dear Reconciliation Committee Members,

As you know, there has been a significant rise in anti-Asian incidents during the last three years. Though catalyzed by the pandemic, which has been blamed on China but visited upon Asian Pacific Americans, anti-Asian incidents have been a pattern in American culture. This anti-Asian sentiment has expressed itself in various ways, publicly through the naming of geographic sites.

One of the most common is "Chinaman." Throughout America, there are geographic sites that bear this derogatory name, as well as "Chink" and "Oriental." According to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, there are at least 29 place names that contain the word "Chinaman." "Chinaman Trail" in Oregon, "Chinaman Creek" in California, "Chinaman Bayou" in Louisiana, "Old Chinaman," a mine in New Mexico, and "Chinmans Canyon" in Colorado are a few examples.

Some folks justify this by erroneously equating Chinaman with Englishman or Irishman, forgetting that the term is used to denigrate people of Chinese ancestry rather than to indicate their ethnicity. Others justify it as simply a matter of local history, which it is – racist local history. And a few say it honors the Chinese workers who once lived among them, forgetting that, in many cases, they had driven them out as part of the ethnic cleansing that had taken place during the 19th century.

It is time to rid the landscape of this pejorative name and replace it with one that truly honors the Chinese who have contributed so much to the country's development and who continue to do so even though they continue to be subjected to harassment and violence.

Thank you for your kind attention and consideration.

William Wei

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CU-Boulder is on the homelands of the Tsitsistas (Cheyenne), Inun-ina (Arapaho), Nuche (Ute), and Other Indigenous Peoples and Nations.

CU UndocuAlly: I support undocumented students, staff, and their families.