

Geographical names and inclusiveness: Using the Salish Sea as an example with students of geography

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Regard for the historical and cultural importance of geographical names is an important objective for a geography teacher. Students should have the opportunity to explore and learn about the layers of history, geography and culture that underpin of the name of a place or geographical feature. Names of water bodies are particularly interesting since people are not only dependent on fresh water, but are drawn to water as evidenced by populations along the world's oceans and seas. Different groups of people view the same water body and apply different sea names. Many of the world's water bodies have either complementary or conflicting names, the latter often being a residual of exploration, military occupation, and colonization. Toponyms have great potential to educate students about the world today and how it once was during earlier times. Toponyms reveal fairness and justice, power and influence, as students study the important role of diplomacy in resolving geographical naming issues such as the East Sea/Sea of Japan.



Figure 1. Author photographs (2013, 2009)

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Figure 2. Aerial photograph (NASA, 2004)



Figure 3. Map of Salish Sea & surrounding basin (Stefan Freelan, WWU, 2009)

Salish Sea lyrics by Holly Arntzen and Briony Penn

A shoreline rock is like one big town,
 try not to turn one upside down
 Barnacles and periwinkles feed on top,
 limpets slide until the waters drop

All these critters say to me...keep singing songs about the Salish Sea

Underneath the rocks the shore crabs hide,
 all awaiting the next high tide
 Gumboot chitons big as your shoe,
 stick to the rocks just like glue

All these critters say to me...keep singing songs about the Salish Sea

Barnacle, periwinkle, flat fish, whelk, cockle, rockweed...BULL KELP!

In between the tide pools, hermit crabs graze,
 sculpins lurk in a coral maze
 Anemones' tentacles look like flowers,
 they stay open at high tide hours

All these critters say to me...keep singing songs about the Salish Sea

Seaweed is anchored to the sea bed,
 green at the top, then brown, then red
 Bull kelp bobbing just offshore,

a nursery for fish, kelp crab and more
All these critters say to me...keep singing songs about the Salish Sea

Barnacle, periwinkle, flat fish, whelk, cockle, rockweed...BULL KELP!

Eel grass blooms, estuaries flow,
this is where all the herring grow
Ducks come to feed on their roe or eggs,
great blue heron on two straight legs

All these critters say to me...keep singing songs about the Salish Sea

Deep in the sand the horse clams squirt,
butter clams next and little necks first
Sea worms squiggle, sandpipers poke,
these are some intertidal folk
All these critters say to me...keep singing songs about the Salish Sea

Figure 4. Artzen and Penn (1989)

The real beauty of learning and teaching Geography with students in the 21st century is the rapidly expanding opportunities to better understand issues from various points of view because information is so readily available. This also enables students to make up their own minds based on evidence and their own findings in research based assignments, readings, and discussions with each other and experts in the field. There are many lessons to be drawn from honoring and respecting all parties concerned with a specific toponym scrutinized, studied and better understood by teachers, students, and the general public and governments. While looking at the ‘power’ geographic names have that are challenged, it is good to look at success stories where parties have come together to seek accommodation and to be inclusive, not exclusive. As is the case for the naming of the Salish Sea, in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, and the Southwest of Canada.

There are clearly several key objectives for teachers and students in examining these geographical, political and historical challenges. The first being better understanding of the complexity of the issues being paramount, but equally important the ability to see another’s point of view while understanding and respecting it. This requires something students are in great need of, that being patience, having understanding and having that ability to listen without judgment. This in turn leads to respect for historical and cultural accuracy, the ability to truly listen and better understand the viewpoint of another without blame or defensiveness. The geographic lens is ultimately even more important especially when it comes to scale. Often times changing scale reveals a solution to a complex local issue. And then if they have done that, then to a deeper understanding required to cooperate towards concrete solutions that allow everyone a say in the outcome. If one succeeds in this learning then it does not matter which side the students are on for they can see and value the other. It is envisioned that this look at the Salish

Sea from a teacher/student perspective will allow a better understanding of how students might participate in contested naming spots in their geographic studies.

“... critical place-name studies by examining the cultural and political implications of the recent designation of the “Salish Sea,” a new name given to the water body adjacent to the shared Pacific coastline of Washington State and the Province of British Columbia.” (Tucker, 2013: abstract)

The initial reasoning for an inclusive name for the body of water was actually an environmental concerned one because the three bodies of water are all interconnected, of common concerns or experiences, so that became the original impetus for a common name first proposed in 1988 by marine biologist Burt Webber. As the song lyrics at the top of this paper, learned by hundreds if not thousands of school children make clear, the Salish Sea has no boundaries and effects peoples on both sides of the USA/Canada border environmentally whether it be quality of water, pollution, or protection of marine life.

“The designation of the Salish Sea was meant to create a new nexus point that had the potential to bring diverse communities together behind the banner of a common interest; the need to protect the waters that bordered and enveloped their villages, towns, and island paradises.” (Tucker, 2013: 116)

There is no historical singular Native American/First Peoples for this body of water although,

“...in 1987, Harvey Manning, proposed giving the name "Whulj" — a native word translated as "the saltwater before us" — to the waters flanked by the Olympic Peninsula to the south, Whidbey Island to the east, and Vancouver Island and the San Juan Islands to the north.” (Cornwall, 2009)

In trying to be inclusive and respectful for the original peoples of the area the name Salish was put forward and eventually adopted by all parties involved.

“In doing so, it illustrates the importance of narrative as an integral part of the cultural production of place. Although this new toponym was initially promoted to raise ecological awareness, it also has considerable implications for reshaping the political, economic, and cultural geographies of the region. Furthermore, the findings conclude that when assessing the designation’s impact on the relations between the Indigenous and Settler populations of the area, evidence points to the official naming being representative of an act of “anti-conquest”: an act that glorifies the Indigenous culture while providing no actual exchange of power or opportunity for increased levels of self-determination. “(Tucker, 2013: abstract)

And yet,

“The Salish Sea, however, is a newly invented toponym, and there is no evidence that a Coast Salish nation ever used a name that specifically referred to the unified waters now known as the Salish Sea, thus it is not being returned, nor was it invented by an Indigenous person or community. While the name can be perceived as an homage of recognition for the Salish peoples, it can also

be perceived as yet another European-imposed inscription upon the landscape, or seascape in this case.” (Tucker, 2013:17)

So while it is a fine example of honoring the historical natives, it is fact actually not an historic term, and could yet be perceived at some future date as more colonializing on the landscape by European Americans. It is in fact a ‘borderbuster’

“Webber's Salish Sea is a borderbuster, it encompasses the waters roughly from Desolation Sound south to Georgia Strait and the Gulf Islands in British Columbia to the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the San Juan Islands and Puget Sound in Washington. The Salish Sea wouldn't replace any existing name but rather act as an overlay on what Webber describes as an unnamed "ecological entity," the Puget Sound-Georgia Basin ecosystem.” (Berger, 2005)

Some further examples of names for the same bodies of water that are contested or have been dually named that may be of potential interest to students besides the Salish Sea, by the USA, Canada, Native Americans and First Peoples; Persian Gulf/Arabian Sea, by Iran and Saudi Arabia; Southern Ocean, by countries of the world; the English Channel/La Manche, by Great Britain and France; and Lake Geneva/ Lac Lemanus, by Switzerland and France and the East Sea/Sea of Japan by Korea and Japan.

One would think that some of these such as the naming of the waters off the Antarctic would be easy to come to an international consensus on, yet one does not exist at this current time for the

“Southern Ocean, (*where*) the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans merge into icy waters around Antarctica. Some define this as an ocean, calling it the Antarctic Ocean, Austral Ocean, or Southern Ocean. While most accept four oceans, including the Arctic, there is no international agreement on the name and extent of a fifth ocean.” (National Geographic, 2018:10)

Or an even easier one to possibly resolve, such as in Switzerland, where there are already four official languages in the country, issues still remain.

“...but a globalizing world has meant that people need to be more attentive to naming practices. This has long been the case in multicultural states. For example, in Switzerland where four languages are nationally recognized, cities in zones with influences from different cultures may often be identified on maps with two names—for example, Delsburg and Delemont or Nerenburg and Neuchatel. Cities clearly in one language area will only be shown with one name, although exceptions do occur. These exceptions can be laden with conflict and be irresolvable. For example, the large lake that Geneva lies on is known there as Lake Geneva, but along the majority of the shoreline in Switzerland and in neighboring France, the lake is known as Lac Lemman, which derives from the Roman name of the lake Lac Lemanus. To this day, Geneveans and the international community use their name, while others use Lac Lemman.” (Francis, 2013:236)

Some examples of names for the same land based challenges and solutions that are contested or have been dually named include Macedonia/Mecedonia by Greece and Macedonia; Derry/Londonderry by the Northern Ireland and Great Britain;

Aotearoa/New Zealand by Maori and European New Zealanders, and the Falkland Islands/Islas Malvinas by Great Britain and Argentina.

There are other powerful ways toponyms can invoke anger, historic challenges, and even family feuds with the power they imply. These also offer students ideal examples for their geographic study Quebec names being in French/English/First Peoples; in Israel/Palestine where sites are often completely renamed by the state in power, Louisiana where Cajun/British/American names often form very decisive borders between groups.

Returning to the issue at hand of the naming of the Salish Sea as a case study for students to more fully understand the time and energy and the ability of an idea to work for all (although there were several Canadian comments that this was just American Imperialism trying to erase Canadian named bodies of water). There are several ways to enter this kind of study with students to better understand the issues. Let us start with the premise that students do not live close enough for field studies to make it easily accessible.

So it is best to start off with a brief discussion of why naming is so powerful; where is it located, and what does the actual area look like on maps, photographs, film, and drawings, a look at the literature, prose and writings on the area, on both a local and regional scale; why it might be important to so many people in the area that live, work and play there. These are the actual people who are the stakeholders: people and governments of the Province of British Columbia, Washington State, Coast Salish Gathering (the alliance of Coast Salish Tribal and First Nations leaders, the Washington State Board on Geographic Names, the Province of British Columbia Geographic Names Office, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names and the Geographical Names Board of Canada, that are the most effected and interested in this issue and what is their combined history behind it. Finally, how can students, even as an exercise, learn to compromise or agree to a new way to better understand a place especially if they do not live there. So although this naming issue has had a common solution to it, it is good for students to see that adults can be reasonable and listen to others with different points of view.

Naming is most important because it carries with it, meaning, stories, and ultimately at least in the west a sense of ownership (some might say entitlement here). This is quite powerful, especially when it comes to inclusion of historic people that have lived in a 'place' for centuries

“A place is any area an observing consciousness distinguishes and separates, by whatever means, from other places... As symbols, place-names are part of the process of attaching meaning to one’s surroundings; they act as sources of information, facilitate communication, help us to know, and serve as repositories of values.” (Cohen and Kliot, 1992:655 in Tucker, 2013:82)

As mentioned above this allows for distinction of specific individual characteristics, but also for political and reframing of the names based on righting historic injustices or correcting them if need be.

“...the belief that it is not enough to simply recognize that there is a “politics”

to the naming of places. Rather, if critical place-name studies is to live up to its name, it must consider how the changing practices of naming continue to reframe the scale of the “political” in unexpected ways, particularly during times of political, economic, or social upheaval.” (Rose-Redwood, 2011:5)

Also place names definitely speak of relationships of people to their environment on a very personal level.

“Place is not an issue of physical matter, it is not the culmination of geographic qualities. Place is a product of the relationships that humans have with specific locations, in other words, it is a social construct. A location un-tethered to humanity by the strings of relationship may be seen as meaningless (or not seen at all). Relationships are both a product of and a contributor to the way in which a place comes to be experienced. In this way, while place-names are commonly understood to be signifiers of locations, perhaps it is better to understand them as signifiers of relationships.” (Tucker 2013:49)

The Salish Sea can be best be described geographically bounded as (see map at top):

“a large inland sea that is diluted by a variety of fresh water sources (it is a very large estuary!). The portion of the sea that lies within the political boundaries of Canada is often referred to as the Georgia Basin, and the body of water lying to the south in the United States is typically called Puget Sound. The Strait of Juan de Fuca acts as the Salish Sea’s connection to the Pacific Ocean, and is divided in half by the U.S. and Canadian border. The Cascade Mountain Range, The Olympic Mountain Range, and the Canadian Coast Range surround the Salish Sea, contributing a significant portion of the fresh water entering the giant estuary.” (Where in the world is the Salish Sea, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060922191034/http://www.estuaries.gov/Paddila2.html>)

Exploring the history of the issue by looking at photographs and song lyrics as those included above, possible films and of course speakers from the for exploring the issues from various points of view (POV). The interesting thing about photographs at least, is scale is so important and students being so visual see almost immediately how adjusting scale gives one a different frame of reference. There is that AHA moment!

So in using the photographs above as an example. If the waters remain pristine enough for the tides to reveal a healthy ecosystem including starfish at the large scale repeatedly, then one can surmise that at a smaller scale the estuaries will be healthy for all sorts of sea life. The stakeholders often live intimate lives with the environment and watching films, exploring their writings and listening to their firsthand thoughts on the topic remains truly valuable.

Students could explore of course what has been written about the topic but even more important might be connecting with the actual people including other students that live in the region now and why the naming is so important. This might include Facebook posts from the Coast Salish Gathering Facebook page, or pages from university student organizations in the area such as Students of the Salish Sea. There are notes from their joint meetings where they discussed common concerns of environmental sustainability and rights to preserve their culture of the Salish Sea. This group actually used the term

before it was common practice or ‘approved’.

“Participants met to discuss the protection of the Salish Sea’s rich marine diversity and other resources unique to the area that stretches from the Georgia Basin, down through the Pudget (*sp?*) Sound and the Straits of Juan de Fuca. These diminishing resources are essential to sustaining the cultures, economies and homelands of the tribes in western Washington and First Nations in British Columbia, and are under significant pressure from population growth, industrial expansion and climate change. The Salish Sea Gathering was a Tribal policy dialogue regarding tribal environmental issues, policies and projects in the trans-boundary region” (Q’Wa – Unity Notes; 2005:1)

Finally, all parties agreed to after two decades of listening, discussing and understanding of each other. The ‘borderbuster’ was approved and recognized by all to be used officially on maps and in daily life.

“It took nearly a quarter of a century, but finally, in late 2009/early 2010, the approval of both naming boards, and their national counterparts, officially brought the Salish Sea into “existence.” It may seem as though the inauguration ceremony represented a fitting and joyous end to the story of the naming of the Salish Sea, a story that chronicles the recognition of a people often under-recognized and speaks to the power of perceptions and the hopes that education can help to heal the world. Certainly this is the story that some will tell, yet the naming of the Salish Sea can also be understood as a narrative process that is far from complete. The meaning of a place, its very spatial identity, is often produced through the struggle over competing narratives, each of which fights to be heard, to be included.” (Tucker 2013:11)

In conclusion, there are many lessons to be drawn from honoring and respecting all parties concerned with specific geographic names scrutinized or studied and better understood by teachers, students, the general public and governments. Any of these examples shared here, including the Salish Sea, or even land based ones that are lesser known such as Macedonia but equally important allow us to share and honor the historic past while also placing value on the inclusion and histories of all parties involved.

“The designation of the Salish Sea represents an act of toponymic inscription that has facilitated more than merely the creation of a new place (which is no small feat in itself). Its profound implications also include a rescaling of the local geography.” (Tucker, 2013:146)

“The authoritative designation of the Salish Sea has proven to be monumental in increasing the acceptance and common usage of the Salish Sea toponym and thus the enactment of the regional scale.” (Tucker, 2013:150)

By looking at the power toponyms have, especially ones with multiple names for a place, by perhaps changing the scale one looks at, there is powerful success story here, that all parties come together to seek accommodation and to be inclusive, not exclusive. They offer students a primer, a blueprint on how best to solve challenges in our increasingly diverse and crowded earth, and gives one hope for even more challenging and important issues to be dealt with an inclusive, respectful and very geographic way.

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