

The debate over changing place names is here to stay

By [TIM LYDON](#) | Writers on the Range
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Becky Bohrer, Associated Press file

The former Mount McKinley in Alaska was renamed Denali by President Barack Obama on Aug. 19, 2011.

At a talk this October, Alaska Republican Sen. Dan Sullivan recounted how President Donald Trump offered to switch the name of Denali, the state's highest peak, back to Mount McKinley. Sullivan boasted that he and fellow Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski quickly nixed the idea. It was only two years ago, in a move that state residents supported, that former President Barack Obama had changed the name from McKinley to Denali.

Trump's offer to change the name of a mountain may simply appear as another act of spite toward his predecessor, but it also bucks growing recognition that it matters a great deal what we decide to call places. Denali, for instance, is an Athabascan word for "great one," and for millennia it's what Alaska's original inhabitants called the continent's highest peak. In 1896, a gold miner tagged the mountain after Ohio-born President William McKinley, a name that stuck but grew unpopular. For years, Alaska's congressional delegation tried to restore the original name, but it was thwarted by Ohio's representatives. Obama's executive action, which preceded his historic 2015 visit to Alaska, ended the standoff.

Renaming Denali is just the latest name change in Alaska. In 2000, residents of Sheldon Point changed their community's name to Nunam Iqua, a Yup'ik word meaning "the end of the tundra." In 2012, Rat Island in the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge — named for the rats introduced through an 18th century shipwreck — became Hawadax, the Unangan word for "entry" or "welcome." Next came a flurry of changes to interior Alaskan rivers and a state census area. In each, Alaska Native words replaced references to explorers, politicians and military figures. The Wade Hampton Census Area was renamed Kusilvak, as Hampton had been a Confederate general and slave owner with no ties to Alaska.

In 2016, citizens of Barrow, famous as America's northernmost incorporated city, voted to change their name to Utqiagvik, pronounced oot-kay-ahg-vik. The Inupiaq word indicates a place to gather wild roots; the old name honored an official in the British Navy.

In Utqiagvik and elsewhere, Indigenous leaders hope the changes serve to both heal and teach. Alaska Natives suffered 20th century oppression by settlers, missionaries and agents of the federal government, who seized land, banned cultural practices and forcibly separated Native children from their parents, placing them in boarding schools. Restoring traditional place names can't undo the past, but it helps repair the lingering cultural damage.

The teaching part helps Native youth learn their languages, which are at risk of slipping away as elders pass, and Alaska Native names, like Indigenous names globally, teach connection to the land. I learned this while living in Southeast Alaska, when the Sealaska Heritage Institute published maps with hundreds of recovered Huna Tlingit names for locations in and around Glacier Bay National Park. For many, the maps redefined familiar landscapes. Places once blandly named after otherwise forgotten British officers or murderous Russian traders were suddenly enlivened by descriptors referring to halibut, crab, shelter or the glint of sunlight on rocks.

But change is not limited to Alaska. In Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana, the derogatory word "squaw" has recently been stripped from scores of place names. Oregon reportedly had the most, including more than 60 Squaw Creeks. Following state legislation, the names are disappearing.

Other offensive names are changing, too. In 2016, the Bureau of Land Management renamed the Negro Bill Canyon Trail near Moab, Utah, while near Washington's Lake Chelan, the racially charged Coon Lake and Coon River were changed to honor an African-American homesteader. Meanwhile, this September, tribes gathered at Yellowstone National Park to protest names currently memorializing 19th century officials who supported genocide against the Blackfoot people. Others have long petitioned to change Mount Rainier and Wyoming's Devils Tower.

Yet changing names is never a simple procedure. Proponents must win over state naming commissions, then petition the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. Support from legislators, governors or public-lands officials is often needed, and local consensus is critical. But consensus is never a given. Residents may object to changes for many reasons, saying that the old names are familiar, that changing maps raises safety issues, or that it costs too much to revise maps, signs and official documents. Even when a proposal gains ground, deciding on a new name can spark more debate, as recently happened in Washington's San Juan Islands. Residents there agreed to jettison Squaw Bay but then opposed an Indigenous suggestion because of a perceived difficulty in pronunciation.

Nevertheless, the debate over place names is here to stay. Regardless of the outcome, we will find ourselves increasingly considering the relationships that have long existed between people, cultures and the places we call home.

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