

Generic terms, feature types and the environment - Australia

One of the usual functions of a toponym, aside from enabling communication, is to characterise the nature of a place. We expect common topographic features, such as rivers, lakes, and mountains, to usually be partly identified by the generic element of the toponym and for those generics to be well known and widely recognised. This means that toponyms, even if the specific component is unrelated to the environment or derives from a language where meaning is not widely understood, can be useful indicators when they include generic terms. Some regions have unusual or unique environments and hence generic terms for landscape features that are unique to them. To support UNGEGN's interest in exploring the relationship between toponyms and the environment, we looked at some of the terms used in Australia and offer initial thoughts on how they may give an indication of the environment itself, and of our relationship to the land.

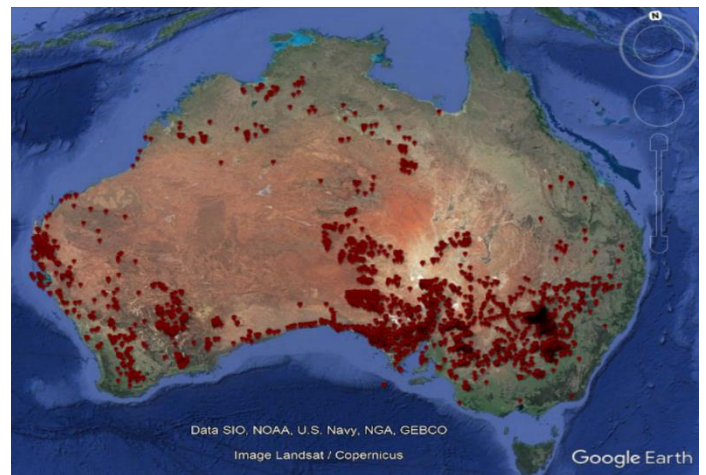
When the British occupied the continent from the end of the eighteenth century, they needed some new terms to describe and categorise the unfamiliar Australian landscape. Except for populated places, the naming system they introduced usually followed the practice of specific plus generic. In some cases, a standard English feature term was redefined and re-used to suit the different landscape. In other cases, words from Indigenous languages were imported into the Australian English toponymic vocabulary.

Australia has the benefit of both a standard catalogue of generic terms that have been used in toponyms (maintained with academic rigour by the Australian National Placenames Survey), as well as a catalogue of named feature types (maintained for data categorisation purposes by the Australia and New Zealand Working Group on Place Names). Recording and standardising the definitions of region-specific generic terms is an important responsibility for naming authorities. An understanding of the connections between geographical names and the environment they represent is not only a valuable cultural resource and decision-making tool for forming new names: it enables a better understanding of the environment in which toponyms have been bestowed and allows for more accurate categorisation of records.

Independent of any other data, a standalone toponym can indicate the presence and significance of a single topographic feature, or collectively they could be mapped by generic term or place type to indicate basic geomorphology across a region. Many terms allude to other environmental factors, for example the location of anchorages and the likely direction of prevailing storms, or the presence of wetlands and particular vegetation types, although the usefulness of these concepts requires further study.

A common generic in Australian toponymy that is an example of understanding the meaning shift from its British origins, is one that also demonstrates the importance of securing a more permanent supply of water than the unaltered

landscape allows: *tank*, which in Australia (in addition to the widely understood concept of a large metal or plastic container) also means 'an artificial water storage site made by digging a hole in the ground, often with the excavated soil used as the retaining wall'.



Mapping the location of toponyms categorised as tanks on a Google Earth basemap shows general alignment with the drier parts of the country.

Credit ICSM Composite Gazetteer of Australia, Qld Place Names Database, and Google Earth.

Australian generics unique to the environment, though, are most often seen in terms imported from Indigenous languages. There are at least 17 Indigenous words that have been incorporated in Australian toponyms as generic elements. The most familiar is probably *billabong*, 'a waterhole in a stream or in an anabranch, which is replenished only in times of flood'. Its use is widespread, with at least 150 entries in the Composite Gazetteer of Australia (CGA). Interestingly, it has replaced a British English word of similar meaning, *oxbow*.

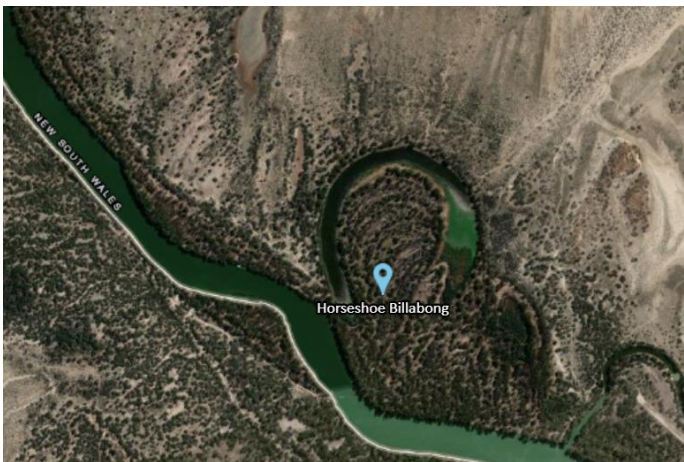
Less well known, but frequently used in Western Australia, is another term that relates to the availability of water in a dry country: *gnamma hole*: 'A natural hole in a rock in which rainwater collects'. There are 46 toponyms reported in the CGA that have the generic element Gnamma Hole(s), in addition fourteen use Gnamma or Gnamma Hole as the specific element (e.g. 'Gnamma Creek', 'Gnamma Hole Hill'). Here we see an example of localised influence of indigenous languages: "gnamma" comes from the Noongar language of southwest western Australia. On the eastern side of the continent there are instances of *cowal*: 'a small swampy hollow in red-soil country', and *warrambool*: 'a waterhole or overflow channel', both deriving from the Gamilaraay language of that area. Not every Indigenous-derived generic relates to inland water: also on the eastern side of the continent we find a term from the



Dharug language, used for a common coastal feature - *bombora*: ‘A submerged reef or rock which produces a wave or dangerous current above it’. The term is widely known within Australia although only used in seven official toponyms. Its hypocoristic form *bommie* is much more common, both as a noun and as part of unofficial toponyms, especially within the surfing and diving communities.



A billabong on Towong Hill Station in Victoria.
Credit Jan Tent



Horseshoe Billabong in NSW.
Credit ICSM Composite Gazetteer of Australia

These are but preliminary thoughts as UNGEGN begins to explore this new theme. The motivations and evolution of toponymic practices is nuanced and there will be individual anomalies in the use of generic terms, as well as occasional variation in how toponyms are categorised by physical feature type. However, it seems there is opportunity for the toponymic record to offer at least a preliminary indicator into environmental and geomorphological features, and into the environmental conditions important to groups of people through time. For this, the ongoing work of both the academic community and government names authorities in maintaining catalogues of generic terms as well as physical feature types is essential.

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