Guest editorial

Antarctic place-names

Throughout history 'explorers' from advanced countries have named places they have 'discovered' in lands occupied by native people from time immemorial, with the result that many local place-names have been disregarded and their history forgotten. Antarctica, however, is the one great land region on Earth that was truly 'discovered' when the South Shetland Islands were sighted in 1819, so that the place-names that gradually evolved in later exploration enshrine *all* the history of human endeavour on the continent.

The main purpose of place-naming is to ensure that geographical features can be unambiguously identified by successive visitors; it is of secondary importance to commemorate a particular expedition and its country of origin. In Antarctica it has been difficult to satisfy this main purpose because, until after World War II, the exploration of the continent was sporadic and followed no ordered pattern. Discoveries were made by expeditions from different countries with the result that place-names arose in a number of languages, most noticeably in the Antarctic Peninsula area, where for many years the place-names 'grew wild'. Members of successive expeditions were often unaware of the names applied by their predecessors and applied their own sets of names to the same features, leaving toponymists to unravel the resulting confusion. In their task toponymists also needed to grapple with the problems of identifying features on indifferent maps and charts, and of rendering names from one language to another. They tended to follow the principle that the earliest name applied to a feature — usually by its discoverer — was the name that should prevail, subject to suitability and provided that a later name had not gained widespread currency. Despite the difficulties, by the time of the International Geophysical Year, 1956–57, progress had been made towards a stable nucleus of names, agreed by most countries in equivalent forms.

Thirty years on, there is no part of Antarctica that is *terra incognita* and, in every area with ice-free land, there is at least a framework of place-names that can be found on a published map or chart, or listed in the relevant gazetteer. In fact, between 1956 and 1980, the number of generally recognized place-names over the whole continent rose from about 3400 to about 12 000.

The need for new place-names is bound to continue but certainly not at the same explosive rate, for most of the important features have now been named. There are now 21 countries operating stations in Antarctica, and the number is increasing year by year. As maps and charts are refined at larger scales, new names in various languages are liable to proliferate, particularly in the vicinity of stations. A good criterion for introducing a new name is that the feature can be reasonably shown on a standard published map or chart. There is little to be said for the *ad hoc* naming of minor features for use in a single report. But the overriding requirement in new naming is that a particular feature should receive only one distinctive name, with allowance for translation into other languages, and this requirement can be met only by liaison between national place-names authorities.

In Antarctica the principal users of place-names are scientists and their associates, but hitherto the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research has avoided direct involvement with geographic nomenclature, in spite of the scientific confusion that can arise from indiscriminate place-naming. Central co-ordination in place-naming is now needed more than ever and could best be provided by the SCAR Working Group on Geodesy and Geographic Information.

G. Hattersley-Smith
Cranbrook, Kent