

Paper Maps and Indigenous Place Names in Canada's Arctic

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Abstract:

By Nunavut Day, July 9, 2015, every post office box in Nunavut's 24 communities received a copy of the Inuit Heritage Trust (IHT)'s Where We Live and Travel (Nunavut) map (Fig. 1), showing the locations of over 10,000 traditionally named places across the territory. These names were collected over decades of interviews with Inuit Elders and hunters who lived with their families on the land before moving into settlements. All place names are in dialects of Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit who have called this place home for centuries. In contrast with the European-style naming convention of using a preponderance of personal names, the indigenous names are descriptive and evocative of place — names that give an impression of the landscape, resources, or features one might encounter across this vast territory.

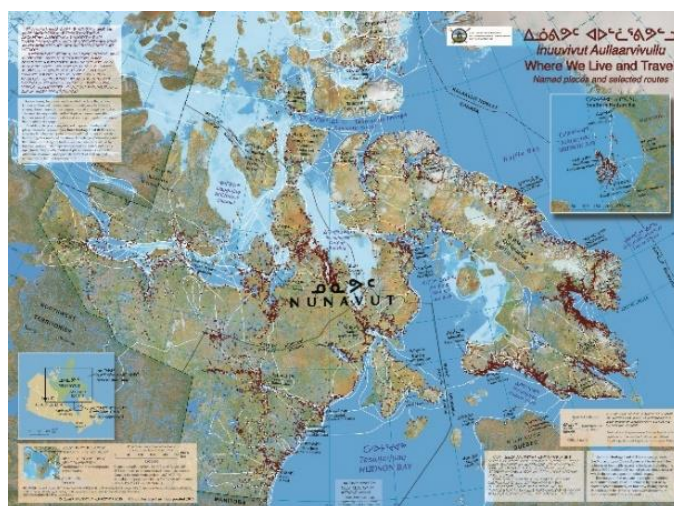


Figure 1. Where we Live and Travel (Nunavut) map. IHT 2005.

IHT has been making thematic, topographic 1:250,000 scale maps with traditional place names available to the public since the early 2000s. While some of these names are now official, most remain unofficial due to administrative delays. Since 2012, IHT has submitted over 3,500 names to the Government of Nunavut, all still awaiting official recognition. In the interim, IHT has also produced 18 large format, “paper” maps (most on a waterproof medium for improved durability) encompassing the greater area around 19 communities with the traditional names in Inuktitut syllabics, the script used in all but two Nunavut communities. These large (69cm x 100cm) community maps are distributed free of charge, two per household, in the communities.

Mapping these traditional place names has revealed the extensive geographic scope of Inuit traditional knowledge. Around Nauyasat, for example, approximately 650 traditional place names have been documented, covering an area exceeding 130,000 km². While early explorer maps, such as those published by Parry in 1822, included only a handful of Inuktitut place names, the current mapping effort captures hundreds of names for the same area, shared orally across generations (Parry 1822). That the place names from Parry's maps are still in use today is a powerful indicator of cultural continuity and the long-term presence of Inuit in the region.

By contrast, Grise Fiord and Resolute, the northernmost communities in Canada with permanent populations, present a different narrative. Created through Canada's 1953–55 High Arctic Relocation, they reflect shorter settlement histories (Dussault & Erasmus 1994). About 145 Inuktitut place names have been documented around Grise Fiord and around 190

for Resolute. Inuit who were relocated here began naming features in their new landscape — sometimes creating new ones or adopting and translating/transliterating existing Norwegian or English toponyms. For example, their initial landing place at Craig Harbour (76°12'25"N 81°00'00"W) continues to be known as Kuuli Haapa, an “inuktutization” of the original name. The community of Grise Fiord’s name derives from the inlet where it is located, named by Norway’s Otto Sverdrup for the walrus, which reminded him of pigs (QIA 2014). The inlet has never been given an Inuktitut name, but the community refers to itself as Ausuittuq, the “place that never thaws”. Greenlandic influences also are evident on the map as Greenlanders assisted the newcomers by sharing knowledge about hunting and fishing locations, the Greenlandic government maintaining a list of indigenous toponyms on Canada’s Ellesmere Island (Johansen, 2019). Here the land was the only thing sustaining the new arrivals, their survival depending almost entirely on their ability to learn the whereabouts and habits of animals, to travel safely, find nourishment and fuel, and stay warm, especially in the long dark winters.

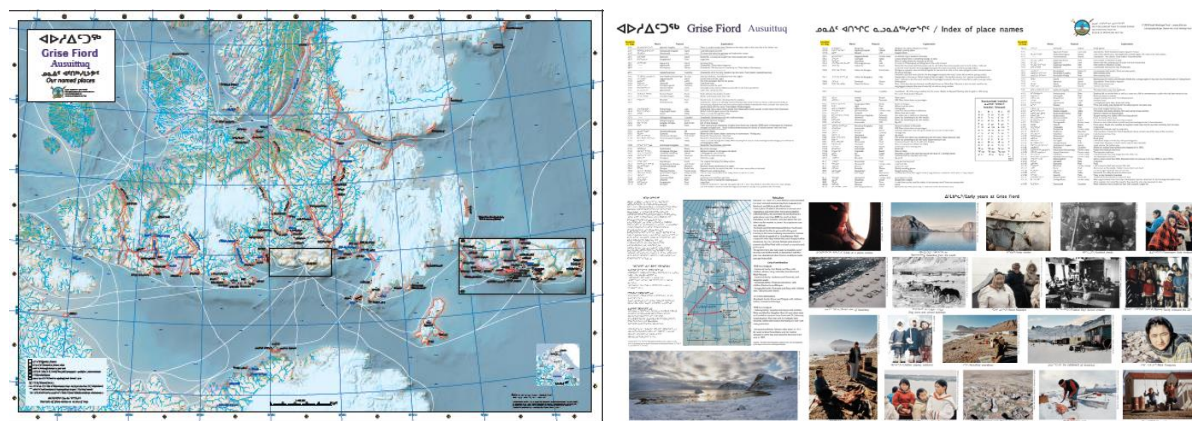


Figure 2. Traditional Place Names in the Grise Fiord Area (front and reverse sides) (IHT 2024).

In addition to the place names on the map face, the reverse side of both the Grise Fiord (Fig.2) and Resolute map posters includes the relocatees’ ship route from their home at Inukjuak, (Port Harrison) Quebec, and early photographs, preserving an important chapter in the community’s and in Canada’s Arctic history.

Each of the community maps produced by IHT includes place names explanations and feature types on the reverse side. Despite the availability of digital maps online and via other social media platforms, we believe physical maps are more effective as enduring tools for sharing knowledge intergenerationally, helping to ensure traditional place names remain central to Inuit cultural identity.

Paper maps widely and freely distributed, act as tangible and communal reference points facilitating a lasting connection to the land that surrounds them. Their presence in homes and community spaces reinforces shared understanding and preserves linguistic detail in a way digital maps have not matched. In Clyde River, for instance, neither the online availability of downloadable maps or the official recognition of traditional place names prevented local interpretations and usage from evolving over the decades— perhaps due to the absence of shared “hard copies”, like paper maps.

Official recognition of the Grise Fiord indigenous place names is expected in 2025, marking a significant milestone for Nunavut and Canada. Paper maps remain a key strategy for community knowledge preservation and as reference tools that reinforce linguistic, cultural, and geographic continuity.

Acknowledgements

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