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Contacts:

Bonnie McGill, PhD, lead author of the “Words Are Monuments” report

724-549-6305

Beka Economopoulos, Director, The Natural History Museum

917-202-5479

New study shows system-scale problem of racist and offensive National Park place-names

A national reckoning with American history and racial injustice has been playing out on the terrain of monuments, museums, school curricula, and increasingly—*maps*.

While the Department of the Interior plans to rename 660 place-names with the derogatory term “sq**w,” a new study published in the journal *People and Nature* shows that misogynist and racist slurs are the tip of the iceberg. Violence in place-names can take many forms, including the erasure of Indigenous knowledge and languages.

Titled “[Words Are Monuments](#)”, the study reveals a system-scale pattern of place-names that perpetuate settler colonial mythologies, including white supremacy. Through a quantitative analysis of 2,200 place-names in 16 National Parks, researchers identified:

- 10 racial slurs
- 52 places named for settlers who committed acts of violence against Indigenous peoples. For example, Mt. Doane, in Yellowstone, and Harney River, in the Everglades, commemorate individuals who led massacres of Indigenous peoples, including women and children.
- 107 natural features that retained traditional Indigenous names, compared with 205 names given by settlers that replaced traditional names found on record.

While the Department of the Interior has established a task force to address derogatory place-names, the agency has [faced some criticism](#) for what Washington State officials and area tribes are calling a rushed process, with [proposed replacement names that are largely colonial](#).

Calls to re-Indigenize place-names in national parks and monuments have been gathering steam, from the Blackfeet Nation's [recent petition](#) to return traditional names to mountains in Glacier National Park, to the Puyallup Tribe's [campaign to rename Mount Rainier](#) to Təqʷuʔməʔ, or Mount Tahoma.

A new website and national campaign inspired by these efforts and the place-names study launches today at [WordsAreMonuments.org](#). Created by the pop-up social justice museum [The Natural History Museum](#), the site features an interactive map with stories from problematic place-names cited in the study; a step-by-step [guide](#) from the National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers on how to officially change place-names; videos interviews with cultural geographers and Tribal leaders; and ways to take action to support renaming campaigns.

The Natural History Museum will also host a [free series of online events](#) featuring Indigenous leaders, artists, activists and scholars that explores:

- Why place names matter and how the movement to 'undo the colonial map' relates to other movements that reckon with American history—to topple Confederate and colonial monuments, decolonize museums, and overhaul school curricula;
- The relationship between language and ideology, and the power of place names in encoding a way of seeing, understanding, and relating to the land;
- How campaigns to re-Indigenize place names on federal lands are not just about making public lands more inclusive, but are stepping stones on the path to Indigenous co-governance and land repatriation;
- The global reckoning with colonial and imperialist history, including successful and ongoing efforts to replace colonial place-names in New Zealand, India, Palestine, South Africa, and beyond.

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Supporting quotes

“We as a people of the Earth are connected to Mother Earth, the source of life. Our history is spiritually connected to the Earth. We take care of the Black Hills, the heart of Mother Earth,

through ceremony. Returning place names is needed more than ever because of the global disasters. The name of sacred sites came from the spirit, through ceremony, through prayer. For example, Mato Tipila, Bear Lodge [Devils Tower] is where the White Buffalo Calf Woman brought us the sacred pipe. I am the 19th generation keeper of the sacred pipe. And yet a soldier can just, out of anger and hatred to our people, rename such a sacred place Devils Tower. In our sacred language we don't even have a word for devil. Returning Mato Tipila, Bears Lodge is the most important derogatory name for Deb Haaland to address."

–**Chief Arvol Looking Horse**, the 19th Generation Keeper of the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe of the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota Great Sioux Nation. Chief Looking Horse has sought to change the name of Devils Tower for decades and his proposal to change the name to Bear Lodge has sat with the Board of Geographic Names since 2015 due to stalling by Wyoming members of Congress.

"Oki, Nistoo Kiaayo Tamisoowo (Bear Returning over the Hill) Chief of the Piikani Nation and President of the Blackfoot Confederacy. I am from the Piikani Nation (itootoo Piikani). The work by Bonnie McGill and her team have shed important light on the true spirit and facts pertaining to National Park Place Names which were in place since time immemorial by our ancestors. To give Place Names to persons who authorized and who carried out the massacre of approximately 173 of my ancestors in 1870 on the Marias River, Montana is an atrocity that only perpetuates the illegitimate honor of persons that would be classified as War Criminals. Hayden Valley ought to be changed to Buffalo Nations Valley and Mount Doane to First Peoples' Mountain."

–**Kiaayo Tamisoowo Chief Stanley Grier of the Piikani Nation** and Blackfoot Confederacy. Chief Grier can be seen in this news story at Yellowstone National Park serving the Declaration on Place Names to a park deputy superintendent. His quote is referring to the Marias River Massacre / Baker Massacre led by, among others, Gus Doane, namesake of Mount Doane in Yellowstone National Park.

"I am a descendant of the Tukudeka who lived in what is now Yellowstone National Park for thousands of years before being forced onto the reservation where I now live. For us, place names are very sacred and spiritual. By returning our traditional place names to our ancestral lands, the spirits of the areas will again hear their true names and will bring healing to the land and people."

–**Mr. Lee Juan Tyler**, Shoshone-Bannock Tribes council member and lives in Fort Hall, Idaho. Mr. Tyler joined Chief Grier (above) at Yellowstone National Park serving the Declaration on Place Names to a park deputy superintendent.

“Traditional native place names are foundational to understanding both place and culture. Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park is engaged in researching, restoring, and perpetuating these names, many of which have been obscured by the passage of time. Hawai‘i is fortunate in that the majority of place names are in ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language), and are in common usage. Reestablishing the use of traditional names has broad support, as the “Hawaiian Renaissance” of the 1970’s continues into the 21st century, and as tens of thousands of people are engaged in revitalizing Native Hawaiian culture.”

–**Mr. Bobby Camara**, retired from Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park and lives in Volcano, Island of Hawai‘i. Mr. Camara has researched traditional Hawaiian place names working with Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) and has participated in the US Board of Geographic Names process to successfully return traditional place names to features in Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park.