

## Why is the North Sea West of Us?: Principles behind the Naming of Seas\*

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the motivations behind sea-naming, by means of examples from Europe but also elsewhere. Why do certain sea names become dominant while others retract into local forms or simply die out? The article takes us back in time to the early days of map-making and, indeed, earlier. Occurrences of sea names such as the North Sea are examined and analysed to see how they spread from an original one-language form to exist in multiple languages, and analyses them from a linguistic, geographic and nautical perspective.

It is found that Seas or bodies of water in stretches of sea are named according to six main principles. Many sea-names are formally secondary names whose specific element is the name of: a) a nearby settlement name; b) a nearby island or c) a nearby country or region. In addition, a sea-name may be a formally primary name named from: d) a directional perspective, e) its appearance or f) containing the name of an explorer or a commemorated person as its specific

### Keywords

sea-names, onomastics, place-names, historical cartography, map-making, international standards

## INTRODUCTION

Growing up on the west coast of Jutland, this author always found it puzzling that the *North Sea* (*Nordsøen*) lay straight west of where I lived. Locally, we never used the term either. We always used a term which translates as: *The West Sea* (*Vesterhavet*, pronounced [æ 'væsdə, hau]) or—more often—simply *The Sea* ([æ 'hau]). Both *Nordsøen* and *Vesterhavet* are authorised place-name forms in Danish—the latter designating only part of *Nordsøen*, according to a ruling of the Danish Place-Name Commission (*Stednavneudvalget*) from 1968.<sup>1</sup> Before then, the name *Vesterhavet* actually had prominence over *Nordsøen*.<sup>2</sup> The ruling of 1968 was an effort to synchronise the Danish authorisation with international standards, it seems.

## NAMING OF WATERS<sup>3</sup>

How did the *North Sea* (*Nordsøen*) ever become the established form for this sea, and what are the general motives behind naming in this way—as in the naming of oceans, seas and parts of seas? As far as this author can see, there are at least six ways of naming bodies of water. In the following pages, the author shall outline what they are and how they are motivated.

A large number of names of waters are formally secondary names whose specifics contain another geographical name, be it the name of a settlement, island, region or country. Others are formally primary names named from how they look or feel or how they are located in relation to another locality/area. A final group could tentatively be called 'exploration names,' i.e. formally primary name constructions with a specific containing the name of the explorer known to have discovered or first navigated the body of water in question. Variations on this theme include commemorative names, where persons (regents, sponsors, scientists, etc.) or places of importance to the discoverer or navigator are reflected in the specific of the name.

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\* This is a revised article based on a paper given at the The 21<sup>st</sup> International Seminar on Sea Names in Helsinki, August 23<sup>rd</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> 2015.

1 Stednavneudvalget (= Danish Place-Name Commission) 1969, Journal no.: 53/69.

2 Cf. the authorisation list for the westernmost county of Denmark: *Fortegnelse over stednavne i Ribe Amt*. Udgivet af Stednavneudvalget. 1967, p. 33 & 48.

3 When I use the term *waters* in this article, it is in the strict sense of 'bodies of salt water.'

## NAME DERIVED FROM A SETTLEMENT NAME

A very common naming motive is where a body of water—usually a bay, fjord, sound or strait—close to land is named after a settlement on the adjacent land. Examples abound, from Denmark *Køge Bugt*, *Faxe Bugt* (see Figure 1) and *Vejde Fjord* (Figure 2) are fine examples of bays which take their name from the main settlement in the bay or fjord area. Internationally, we have the *Sea of Azov* (Figure 3) between Crimea and the Southern Russian Rostov Oblast and *Loch Eriboll* in Northern Scotland (Figure 4).<sup>4</sup>

Although it would be natural to assume that the settlement is used to name the water feature would be situated on the waterfront, this is often far from the case. In the examples stated above, only the towns of *Køge* and *Vejde* are situated by the body of water named from them. In the case of *Sea of Azov*, *Loch Eriboll* and *Faxe Bugt*, the geographical names they take their name from are situated

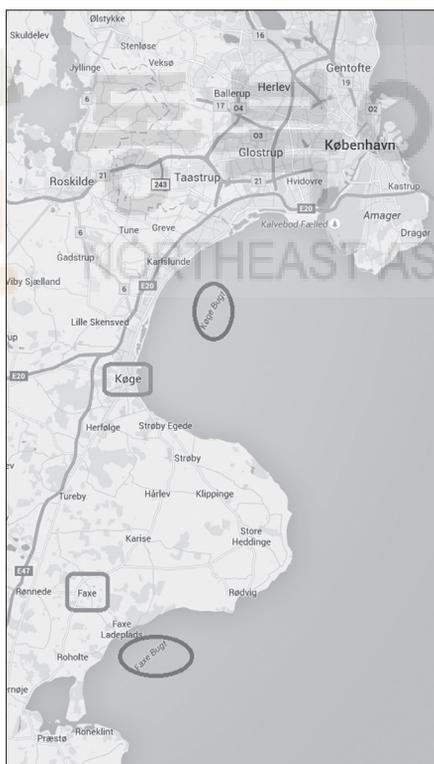


Figure 1. *Køge Bugt* and *Faxe Bugt*

Map data © 2015 Google

4 Of other name in this category may be mentioned: *Adriatic Sea*, *Bristol Channel*, *Gulf of Aden*, *Gulf of Aqaba*, *Gulf of Riga*, *Gulf of Suez*, *Makassar Strait*, *Sea of Azov*, *Sea of Okhotsk* and the *Singapore Strait*—all from the publication *Limits of Oceans and Seas* (1953) of the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO).

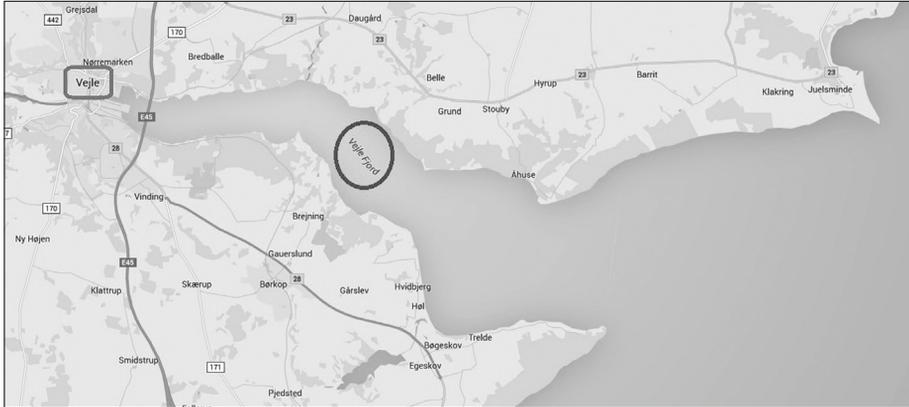


Figure 2. Vejle Fjord

Map data © 2015 Google



Figure 3. Sea of Azov

Map data © 2015 Google



Figure 4. Loch Eriboll

Map data © 2015 Google

some distance inland, albeit with Azov placed on the Don running via the Taganrog Bay into the Sea of Azov.

The naming motive thus does not seem to be owing to the situation of the geographical name in direct relation to the named body of water, but rather the most important place in the vicinity of the body of water.

## NAME DERIVED FROM AN ISLAND-NAME

Another rather common naming motive is to name bays or seas after the name of the island which delimits (part of) the extent of the water feature. Such an example can be seen in the Danish *Sejerø Bugt* (Figure 5), where the island of *Sejerø* comprises a nice delimitation for the bay itself. Even more visible is this naming motive if the naming focus is a group of islands, such as the *Balearic Islands* and the *Andaman Islands*—almost enclosing the *Balearic Sea* and *Andaman Sea*<sup>5</sup> (Figures 6 and 7) on the sea side in the same way as terrain does it on the land side.<sup>6</sup>

The named island does not always act as a delimiter. Sometimes the naming motive seems to be a direct relation to the water feature only, as in the case of the island of *Hanō* being the naming motive for *Hanōbukten* (Figure 8) in southern

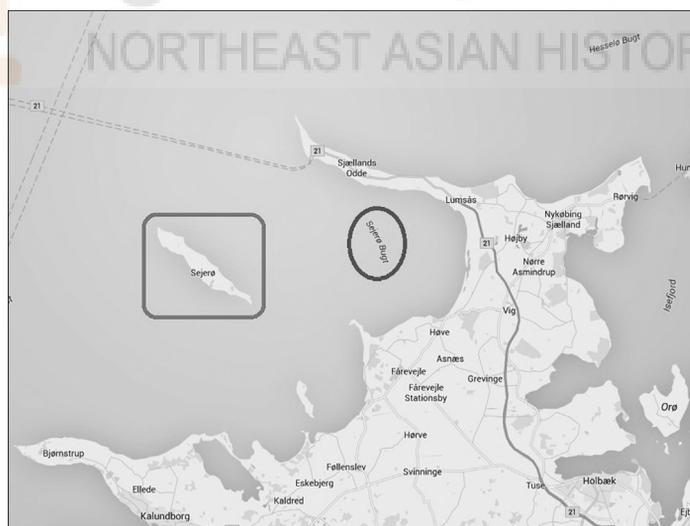


Figure 5. Sejerø Bugt

Map data © 2015 Google

- 5 According to the *Limits of Oceans and Seas* (1953), The Andaman Sea is termed *Andaman or Burma Sea*.
- 6 Other examples from this naming category from *Limits of Oceans and Seas* (1953): The *Balearic Sea*, *Bali Sea*, *Banda Sea*, *Celebes Sea*, *Ceram Sea*, *Flores Sea*, *Halamaheira Sea*, *Java Sea*, *Laccadive Sea*, *Savu Sea*, *Solomon Sea* and the *Timor Sea*.



Figure 6. The Balearic Sea

Map data © 2015 Google



Figure 7. The Andaman Sea

Map data © 2015 Google





Figure 9. The Baltic Sea

Map data © 2015 Google



Figure 10. The Greenland Sea and the Norwegian Sea

Map data © 2015 Google

land, Gulf of Tomini, Indian Ocean, Ionian Sea, Japan Sea, Kara Sea, Labrador Sea, Ligurian Sea, Malacca Strait, Molukka Sea, Mozambique Channel, Norwegian Sea, Persian Gulf, Philippine Sea, Rio de La Plata, Sea of Marmara, Strait of Gibraltar, Sulu Sea and the Tyrrhenian Sea.



Figure 11. Gulf of Thailand  
Map data © 2015 Google

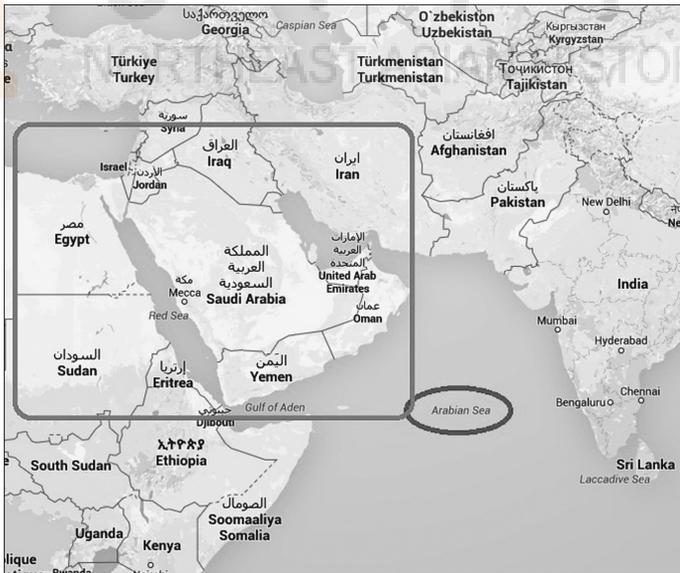


Figure 12. The Arabian Sea  
Map data © 2015 Google

motive is not a single country but rather a language or cultural region, usually referred to as ‘the *Arabic Countries*’ (Figure 12), in spite of the fact that e.g. India and Pakistan (Hindi and Urdu, Indoeuropean languages) border this sea also.

## NAME DERIVED FROM A DIRECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

In some respects seemingly related to the above naming motive, but not quite so popular, is naming from a directional perspective. This is where we find names like the *North Sea*, at the outset of this article (Figure 13).<sup>8</sup> The majority of names of water features which share this naming motive are of the reciprocating type, such as the *North Atlantic* vs. the *South Atlantic* (Figure 14).<sup>9</sup>

Only in very few cases is the naming cause truly directional, i.e. where a fixed location or delimited area (on land) forms the directional basis from which naming has been undertaken. Such an example is the *North Sea*. Seeing the area on the map, it is clear that the only area truly to the south of the North Sea is the Netherlands (Figure 13). Being world leaders for centuries in map making and—not least—seafaring, this relatively small country has exerted immense influence on the sailing vocabulary and sea nomenclature. And it is in this capacity the capability to determine the name of the North Sea—and other names (see below)



Figure 13. The North Sea

Map data © 2015 Google

8 Apart from the *North Sea*, there are just the *Northwestern Passages* and *Southern Ocean* of this category in the *Limits of Oceans and Seas* (1953).

9 The examples in this category from the *Limits of Oceans and Seas* (1953) are: *Eastern China Sea*, *North Atlantic Ocean*, *North Pacific Ocean*, *South Atlantic Ocean*, *South China Sea* and the *South Pacific Ocean*.



Figure 14. The North Atlantic and the South Atlantic

Map data © 2015 Google

—has arisen. It is true that there were a number of national efforts for countries to obtain their own map making industries but both the inspiration and in many cases the map makers themselves were Dutch, which only caused the Dutch influence to deepen even more in maritime cartography.

### NAME DERIVED FROM APPEARANCE

The Dutch influence in Danish waters extend to more than just the name of the North Sea, the neighbouring waters leading into the Baltic are called *Skagerrak* and *Kattegat* (Figure 15). Both these names are Dutch formations describing the appearance of these waters.

The first name, *Skagerrak*, is a formally secondary name, utilising a Dutch declension of the name of *Skagen*, the northern most point of Jutland, as its first ele-

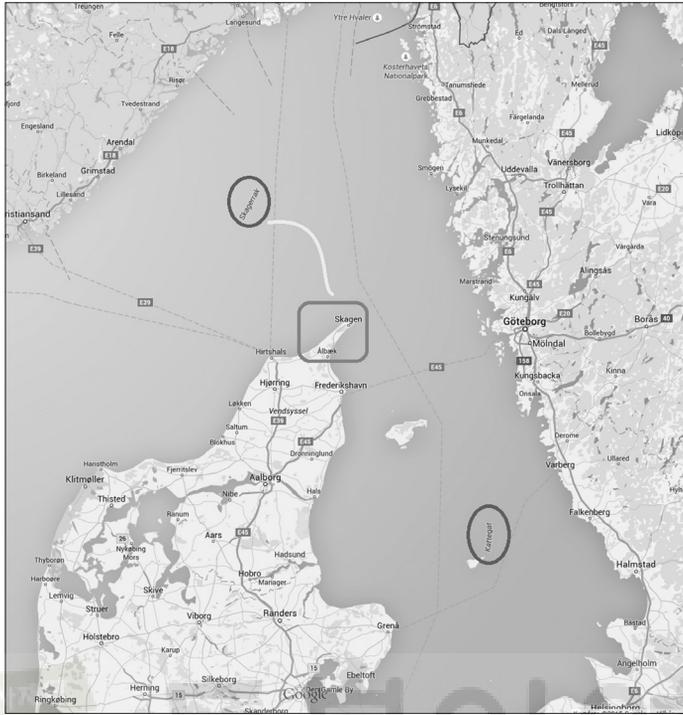


Figure 15. Skagerrak and Kattegat

Map data © 2015 Google

ment and the Dutch *rak* ‘straight (line)’ as its second element. The meaning of the name is thus something like “The way straight past Skagen.” The second name, Kattegat, is no less picturesque in its name, being a compound of the Dutch words *kat* ‘cat’ and *gat* ‘hole,’ yielding a meaning of “Cat-hole,” signifying that it is a water which is difficult to navigate, so narrow that only a cat can squeeze through it.

It is clear from these two examples that appearance is not the same as appearance on land. Here, naming is concerned with navigability and accessibility, and less how something looks, which colors it has or shape, as is a common naming motive for land-features.<sup>10</sup>

## EXPLORATION NAMES AND COMMEMORATIVE NAMES

A common naming motive—particularly throughout the New World—is naming after explorers or people and places important to the naming explorers.<sup>11</sup> This

<sup>10</sup> Examples from this category in the *Limits of Oceans and Seas* (1953) are: *The Bay of Fundy, the Black Sea, the Coral Sea, the Great Australian Bight, Kattegat, the Red Sea, Skagerrak, the White Sea and the Yellow Sea.*

<sup>11</sup> The examples within this category from the *Limits of Oceans and Seas* (1953) are: *The Aegean Sea, Baffin Bay, Barentsz Sea, Bass Strait, Beaufort Sea, Bering Sea, Bismarck Sea, Davis Strait, Hudson Bay, Hudson Strait, Laptev Sea, Lincoln Sea, Tasman Sea,* as well as the last part of the IHO name the *Irish Sea and St.*



Figure 16. Hudson Bay and Hudson Strait Map data © 2015 Google



Figure 17. The Tasman Sea Map data © 2015 Google

naming motive is particularly common with names of islands or regions (Gammeltoft [under publication]), but can also be found in names of waters, such as *Hudson Strait* and *Hudson Bay* (Figure 16) in North America and the *Tasman Sea* (Figure 17) between Australia and New Zealand. The first two names have been named after Sir Henry Hudson, who explored the area in 1610, whereas the Tasman Sea was named after the Dutch explorer Abel Tasman, who navigated in Australian waters in 1644. To understand the naming motives for these names, it is necessary for some historical knowledge in order for the name to give any meaning. The general aspect with this type of name is that the name says nothing about the named locality in question, or of its environs—in this respect it is a neutral name, although from a socio-historical perspective the name may well

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*George's Channel.*



Figure 18. Jan Janssonius. 1647. *Toitus lutiae*

Source: Bruun Rasmussen Kunstauktioner

be heavily laden—both positively and negatively—with a bias towards a single user group.

Both *Hudson Bay* and the *Tasman Sea* have different names in local indigenous languages, the latter is called *Te Tai-o-Rehua* in Māori—and informally *The Ditch* by Australians and New Zealanders (Taonui [webpage]). The local name for Hudson Bay in Inuktitut is *Kangiᑭᓂᓄᓐᓄᓐᓄᓐ ilua*,<sup>12</sup> which has no relation to the English or French (*baie d'Hudson*) names for the Bay.

## HOW DID TODAY'S SEA NAMES COME ABOUT?

The majority of our international names of oceans, seas, bays, straits, sounds and other water features derive from a distinct period, namely the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Dutch seafaring, exploration and cartography was at its highest (Bramsen 1952, 68-90). Virtually all of the names on maps of the period prior to 1600 do not exist today. This is mainly due to the fact that these names were Latin derived place-names or Latinised forms of local names. The first Dutch atlases from c. 1570-1610 do still feature Latin or Latinised forms. But the later Dutch mapmakers started to introduce vernacular name forms for water localities. ‘Ver-

<sup>12</sup> *Weltkarte mit Originalschriften*. Planet Poster Editions, 2006.



Figure 19. Nicolai Jonge. 1759. *Landkort over Kongeriget Danmark*

Source: Royal Danish Library

nacular’ should not be seen in its modern sense as names given by local peoples—in most cases, they are original Dutch coinages.

A fine example of the transition from Latin to vernacular forms is seen in the 1647 Jan Janssonius’ map *Toitus Iutiae. Generalis Accurata delineatio* (Figure 18), where the current names of the North Sea and Skagerrak are termed “MARE GERMANICUM, vulgo De Noord zee” and “SINUS CODANUS, vulgo t’Schager Rack,” respectively. It is quite clear that the mapmakers are hedging their bets by stating both the, at the time, established forms as well as the forms used in daily (Dutch) usage would suffice.

In the latter part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch influence diminishes, but the power of Dutch cartography is so strong that most cartographical names are transferred into the various national cartographic publications. Two examples are the maps by the Danish publisher Nicolai Jonge from 1759 (Figure 19) and the German publisher Weiland from 1825 (Figure 20), where the Dutch names, *de Noort Zee*, *t’Schagerrack*, *Kattegat* and *de Oost Zee* have been transferred into Danish *Nordsøen*, *Schager rak*, *Kattegat* and *Østersøen* and German *Die Nord See*, *Skager Rack*, *Cattegat* and *Die Ost See*, respectively.

In the New World, the Dutch influence is also great, albeit with a greater British and French nomenclature. This is mainly due to the weaning influence of



Figure 20. C.F. Weiland. 1824. *Das Königreich Daenemark*

Source: Royal Danish Library

Dutch cartography at the time of exploration and Western European settlement in these regions.

## DO TODAY'S WATER FEATURE NAMES GIVE RISE TO DISPUTES?

Fortunately, most countries agree on the international terms for waters. The reason for this must mainly be sought in the fact that the majority of water feature names do not give rise to strife. However, it is possible to envisage possible controversy where the water feature contains another geographical name, particularly a settlement name or a country name, as the named feature would always be situated in one of the two (or more) countries concerned. An example of a disputed water feature name with a settlement name is the *Bay of Piran*, bordering Croatia and Slovenia. This small body of water—depending on one's point of view—lies either wholly within Slovenian territory or is divided between Slovenia and Croatia. In short, Slovenia believes the entire bay to be within its national jurisdiction, whereas Croatia believes that there is an international border between the two

countries running along the bay's median line. As with other maritime features, the *Bay of Piran* was named after the nearby town of *Piran*, which lies within Slovenia. The name of the bay was common to both the Slovenian *Piranski zaliv* and the Croatian *Piranski zaljev* languages when both countries were joined in the state of Yugoslavia. But being possibly shared between two countries, Croatia has stated that the bay should also have a separate Croatian name, *Savudrijska vala* (Savudrija Bay), a name taken from the small village of *Savudrija*, located on the Croatian side of the bay (Woodman 2015). This is one of the few examples of a disputed water feature name of this kind. Why is this so? It is difficult to envisage why, but one possible explanation could be that the country where the named feature belongs would always be content with the name. The other involved parties, on the other hand, would always be looking towards or facing the named feature—thus having a natural view-point perspective to the named feature. This would give the other part a natural sense of ownership to the name also—as it is, literally, in their sight. There may of course be other socio-historical factors as to why this line of thought is not accepted by some.

There has also been controversy about the appropriateness of the name *Persian Gulf*, which, after the rise of Pan-Arabianism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century became disputed. In short, the Arabic Countries insist on calling the gulf the *Arabian Gulf*, whereas Iran persists on the form *Persian Gulf*. Cartographically, the last form holds a clear precedent over the first, and the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) dealt with the naming issue during its 23rd session, held in Vienna from 28 March to 4 April 2006, following the submittal by Iran of a paper on the naming issue.<sup>13</sup> According to the report of the meeting, the Convenor “noted that countries could not be prohibited from using or creating exonyms.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, this naming dispute remains unresolved.

It is also possible to see the view-point orientation, i.e. the *North Sea* type, as a possible name type of contention. This is also rarely the case, and in this case the reason for accepting the international name forms of this kind seems to be historical rather than anything else.

One great exception to this seems to be the international name for the body of water which is bordered by Japan, North Korea, Russia, and South Korea. In 1992, objections to the name *Sea of Japan* were first raised by South Korea and North Korea at the Sixth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names. The Japanese government supports the use of the name *Sea*

13 UNGEGN 23.14, W.P. 61: *Historical, Geographical and Legal Validity of the Name: Persian Gulf*.

14 Report of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names on the work of its twenty-third session. Document E/2006/57, Economic and Social Council, United Nations. New York, 2006, p. 21.

of Japan, while the Republic of Korea (South Korea) supports the name *East Sea*, and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) supports the name *East Sea of Korea*. Currently, most international maps and documents use either the name *Sea of Japan* (or equivalent translation) by itself, or include both the name *Sea of Japan* and *East Sea*, cf. e.g. Google Maps.

In 1974, International Hydrographic Organization (IHO) released Technical Resolution A.4.2.6. This resolution stated that:

It is recommended that where two or more countries share a given geographical feature (such as a bay, a strait, channel or archipelago) under different names, they should endeavour to reach agreement on a single name for the feature concerned. If they have different official languages and cannot agree on a common name form, it is recommended that the name forms of each of the languages in question should be accepted for charts and publications unless technical reasons prevent this practice on small scale charts.

The Republic of Korea has argued that this resolution is relevant to the debate about the Sea of Japan and implies that both names should be used. On the other hand, Japan has argued that the resolution does not apply to the Sea of Japan. At the 18<sup>th</sup> International Hydrographic Conference held in April 2012, regarding the revision of *The Limits of Oceans and Seas* from the single use of *Japan Sea* to dual names of *East Sea* and *Sea of Japan* for the above-mentioned sea, member states were unable to reach an agreement. On 6 August 2012, representatives from North and South Korea addressed an assembly at the United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, asking that the names "East Sea" and "Sea of Japan" be used concurrently for the sea.<sup>15</sup> The chairman of the conference responded that the organization had no authority to decide the issue and requested that the involved countries resolve the differences over the name amongst themselves.<sup>16</sup> The naming issue thus still remains unresolved.

Appearance should rarely give rise to dispute, but one recorded case which does exist is the case of the Scandinavian *Skagerrak*. The dispute, however, is not about the name as such but rather of its spelling. There was a brief war of words between the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish place-name commissions in 1968 and 1969 as to authorise the form *Skagerrak* or *Skagerak*. Norway was very much in favour of the latter, and although both Denmark and Sweden declared themselves ready to accept the Norwegian demands in order to keep the inter-Scandinavian peace, it was decided that the form *Skagerrak* would be the national name

<sup>15</sup> UNCISG E/CONF101/144, Report of the 8<sup>th</sup> Conference. New York, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Genba stands firm on Senkakus; Koreans in 'East Sea' push, *Japan Times*, 8 August 2012, p. 2.

form in Norway, Sweden, Denmark as well as internationally.<sup>17</sup> The main reason for this seems to be the fact that this form was already the most used internationally.

‘Exploration names’ may also be seen as possibly contentious, and even if local indigenous forms exist side by side of internationally established ones, they seem to retain their strength internationally. However, I would envisage that this is where we could see the greatest number of changes in the future.

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<sup>17</sup> Stednavneudvalget (= Danish Place-Name Commission) 1968 and 1969, Journal nos.: 2/68, 5/68, 56/68, 16/69 and 103/69.

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