

Summary: Black Elk Peak – Harney Peak Name Change

U.S. Board on Geographic Names decision – August 11, 2016

On August 11, at the regular meeting of the Domestic Names Committee, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) voted unanimously to change the name of Harney Peak in South Dakota to Black Elk Peak for Federal use. The mountain is not only the highest point in the state, but is the highest peak east of the Rocky Mountains.

The summit had been labeled Harney Peak on Federal maps since 1896. The feature is located in the Black Elk Wilderness of Black Hills National Forest in Pennington County in southwestern South Dakota.

The name Black Elk Peak was formally proposed to the BGN in October 2014. The BGN sought opinions from the U.S. Forest Service and the South Dakota Board on Geographic Names (SDBGN), which in turn sought opinions from the county government, numerous local, State, and Tribal organizations, and the general public.

In making the decision, the BGN acknowledged the recommendations by the SDBGN and a number of state legislators to retain the name Harney Peak. However, the BGN also recognized the wishes of native peoples and many non-native South Dakotans that a new geographic name should be given to this feature that is regarded as a sacred site by several Tribes.

U.S. General William S. Harney fought against native peoples in the Black Hills region of South Dakota and in the Seminole Wars in Florida. Black Elk or Nicholas Black Elk (1863-1950) was a revered Oglala Lakota (Sioux) holy man.

The BGN members determined that, in this particular instance, the name Harney Peak was subject to Policy V of its [Principles, Policies, and Procedures](#):

The guiding principle of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names for the names of places, features, and areas in the United States and its territories is to adopt for official Federal use the names found in present-day local usage. An exception to this principle occurs when a name is shown to be highly offensive or derogatory to a particular racial or ethnic group, gender, or religious group. In such instances, the Board does not approve use of the names for Federal maps, charts, and other publications.

"The current name is painful and distressing to the Tribal people. That's a reasonable justification for the change," said one BGN member during the lengthy deliberation.

The new name is now considered official for use in Federal maps and publications. State and local governments as well as commercial entities generally follow the Federal use of

geographic names as a matter of efficiency, although there is no law requiring this.

About the Board

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names is the geographic names authority for the Nation. It is a coordinating body made up of representatives from Federal departments, agencies, and organizations who receive no additional compensation for this specialized work. The BGN standardizes and approves geographic names so that geographic references can be used consistently in Federal publications and communications.

President Benjamin Harrison established the BGN by Executive Order in 1890 to resolve conflicts in geographic names. In 1947 Congress reestablished the BGN in its current form by public law.

The standardization of names not only serves to preserve a record of geographic names across the Nation, but it enables the use of uniform geographic names in many digital settings — for example, it makes navigation by GPS possible by facilitating standard location references.

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