

What's In A Name?

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IN BRITAIN, ANGLO-SAXON PLACE-NAMES HOLD HYDROLOGICAL CLUES.

One of the joys of travel, even of armchair travel, is the discovery of euphonious place-names. I've driven through both Humptulips, on Washington's Olympic Peninsula, and Quonochontaug, in Rhode Island, and in both cases, these names, which I find flow off the tongue, flow in another way, too. Each describes the place's hydrological characteristics. Humptulips, in the tongue of the Chehalis Tribe, tells that it is "hard to pole" a canoe through the river, which follows a convoluted course that includes fast, narrow torrents. Quonochontaug (Narragansett for "at the long pond") is along a string of broad, placid coastal lagoons.

The guide that indigenous names can provide to landscape qualities and to human interactions with landscape may be followed anywhere such names have not been erased by the conquest of colonialism. This is no less true in Britain, where four universities—Leicester, Southampton, Nottingham, and Wales—have joined forces under a grant from the Leverhulme Trust for a two-year study of place-names called "Flood and Flow."

In Britain, an extra dimension to the record of place-names provides a set of clues to how particular landscapes might respond to global warming in the near future. In the period between 700 and 1000 AD, temperatures in the British Isles rose rapidly after a cold phase that began in 400 AD. Extreme weather and an abundance of precipitation in this time is a historic parallel to our present-day situation, and thus the Anglo-Saxon names have once again become meaningfully descriptive of their sites. Not only is this helpful, but a great many of Britain's present place-names were devised in precisely this period. Though few written records remain from this time, even a modern map holds a hydrographic key to possible futures that have been written in the past.

Some of these names have particular poignancy. Muchelney, in the Somerset Levels, was cut off during the extreme winter floods in 2013–2014. Muchelney means "big island." Communities along the River Swale in Yorkshire have increasingly frequent opportunities to find out that its name derives from Old English *swalwe*, meaning "gush of water." The River Trent, meanwhile, is "the trespasser."

Richard Jones at the University of Leicester is the principal investigator for "Flood and Flow" and a specialist in medieval landscapes. He published the paper "Responding to Modern Flooding: Old English Place-Names as a Repository of Traditional Ecological Knowledge" in the *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* in 2016. He says the project's aims fit within a larger understanding of indigenous naming. "Place-names are used by all indigenous, aboriginal, and First Nations peoples to communicate information about the local presence, behavior, and characteristics of water," he says. "For these communities, such names helped them to share and pass on the traditional ecological knowledge gained through generations of observation of the flood and flow of water through their home grounds. As such, such names act as active makers of place rather than the passive markers of space they have become in the modern western mind."

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Visit waternames.wordpress.com to learn more about "Flood and Flow."