

**Brief  
Communication:  
Getting Greenland's  
glaciers right**

A. A. Bjørk et al.

# Brief Communication: Getting Greenland's glaciers right – a new dataset of all official Greenlandic glacier names

A. A. Bjørk<sup>1</sup>, L. M. Kruse<sup>2</sup>, and P. B. Michaelsen<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Natural History Museum of Denmark, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

<sup>2</sup>Oqaasileriffik – The Greenland Language Secretariat, Ministry of Culture, Education, Research and Church, Nuuk, Greenland

<sup>3</sup>Danish Geodata Agency, Danish Ministry of the Environment, Copenhagen, Denmark

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Correspondence to: A. A. Bjørk (andersb@snm.ku.dk)

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## Abstract

With this new dataset we wish to give the researcher working with Greenlandic glaciers the proper tool to finding the correct name for glaciers and ice caps in Greenland, as well as to locate glaciers described in the historic literature with the old Greenlandic orthography.

### 1 Why place names matter

It goes without saying that referring to a geographical feature by the same name saves both the reader and the author a lot of trouble. However, problems may arise when there is no consensus as to which feature is referred, or when the name has changed in time. Particularly in Greenland, history has not been kind to the researcher who wishes to get the place names right. The written Greenlandic language has undergone changes since the first expeditions and names have changed through time. Furthermore, the languages spoken on the east and west coast of Greenland also differ causing further dissimilarities in the names. Therefore, it can be quite a challenge to apply the correct place name in Greenland.

It is with this predicament that we wish to share with the cryospheric community this dataset of official names of all Greenlandic glaciers. Using this dataset will avoid future misunderstandings regarding the glaciers names, as well as aid researchers in locating glaciers based on old names found in the literature. In addition, it is essential to emphasize the importance of cultural identity found within a native language. Therefore using the correct and official names, which are often of Greenlandic origin sends a positive signal to the local community of inclusion rather than exclusion.

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## 2 A brief history of Greenlandic place names

The official Greenlandic authority of place names Nunat Aqqinik Aalajangiisartut (NAA) and the Danish Geodetic Institute now called the Danish Geodata Agency (GDA) have been well aware of the problems that may arise from differing place names, and have initiated a formalization of all Greenlandic place names. This is no easy task with a country of Greenland's size, where humans have lived and traveled for centuries vigorously naming features in the landscape. In addition to names already enlisted in the official data base, names have also been collected from maps, historic literature and from oral accounts.

Traditionally the Greenlandic place names have been more of a description of the place rather than a name in the classical form. The name can often aid the traveler or scientist in understanding the particularity of the place. This is also the case with many of the glacier names, however no complete translation exists (Geodatastyrelsen, 2013). Contrary, the Danish/foreign names were often given to the glaciers during expeditions and are rarely descriptive of the glacier. Instead the glacier names were often given to please funders, family, colleagues, and contemporary celebrities.

Registration of place names in Greenland became formalized in 1934 when the Greenland Place Names Committee was formed in Denmark (Kleivan, 1990). Efforts to formalize the place names were then made during the creation of a large map-series of the entire coast line. During this process a representative from the Danish Geodetic Institute would travel the coast and record all known names with assistance of locals. All sorts of features were recorded and the geographic location pinned down on the map. The place names were thus a result of the communication with the locals and the quality of the existing maps. This record along with names from previously published maps passed the board at the Place Name Committee became part of the official list of recognized place names. This data base, known as the "*Berthelsen List*", consisted of more than 25 000 entries, and was known to contain errors and discrepancies. In 1984 the responsibility of the Greenlandic place names was transferred to the Greenland

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Home Rule and NNA, and since then more than 6000 additional names have been added. It is from this list of place names that all glacier names have been extracted. Furthermore, all glacier entries have subsequently gone through a vigorous quality control, erasing double entries and replacing misplaced data points. Higgins (2010) contains a comprehensive history of Greenlandic place names, which also includes a long list of both official and unofficial place names in northeast Greenland.

### 3 A new dataset of Greenlandic glacier names

The present dataset is a compilation of all official Greenlandic glaciers names (733 glaciers in total). The database contains the old Greenlandic spelling of the name of the glacier, as well as the new Greenlandic spelling, the Danish/foreign name, and the now official place name. The current official place name is the new Greenlandic name, and when no Greenlandic name exists the official name is the Danish/foreign name. Many of the Danish glacier names are spelled including the letters, Æ(æ), Ø(ø), and Å(å).

By examining the dataset, one might notice their favorite glacier missing from the list. This can be explained by the fact that the glacier name under question has yet to be recognized as an official name, or has been discarded in the past. There are several examples of glaciers that have been widely studied and whose name may appear official, yet this is not the case. A prominent example is the most studied local glacier in Greenland, known as the “Mittivakkat Gletscher” (Mernild et al., 2011). The name “Mittivakkat” (formerly spelled “Midtluagkat”) refers to the large nunatak on the glacier, and was mapped in 1932, by the 7th Thule-expedition led by the Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen (Rasmussen, 1933). Later the glacier has been given its unofficial name by researchers studying the glacier (Frstrup, 1960; Hasholt, 1976; Larsen, 1959), however the name was never authorized by the proper authorities. There are many similar examples along the coast of Greenland.

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It should be noted that the database of official Greenlandic glacier names is not exhaustive nor finished – it is a work in progress and the NAA is continuing the process of registering new and old place names. In connection to the publication of the present dataset, we strongly urge the scientific community to send suggestions of old and already established glacier names that does not appear on the list to the corresponding author. It is recommended that these should be sent along with references in which the glacier name appears. We will then gather all these unofficial place names and submit a single application to the NNA, after which the names will be considered. Once the glaciers names are on the official list, they will appear on official maps in the future – according to map scale and purpose. This collaborative scientific effort will greatly assist and ease future work in this area of the world and clarify the nomenclature of Greenlandic place names.

#### 4 Using this dataset

The dataset presented is attached as Supplement. To avoid further confusion regarding the use of the correct name, we suggest that the official glacier name is used whenever referring to a Greenlandic glacier. However, as many glaciers have been studied in the past and literature refers only to the Danish/non-Greenlandic name, we suggest that both names are mentioned in the text in cases where a glacier with multiple names appears. When using this dataset please refer to this publication.

**The Supplement related to this article is available online at  
doi:10.5194/tcd-9-1593-2015-supplement.**

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Rasmussen, K.: Explorations in Southeastern Greenland: preliminary report of the sixth and seventh Thule expeditions, *Geogr. Rev.*, 23, 385–393, 1933.

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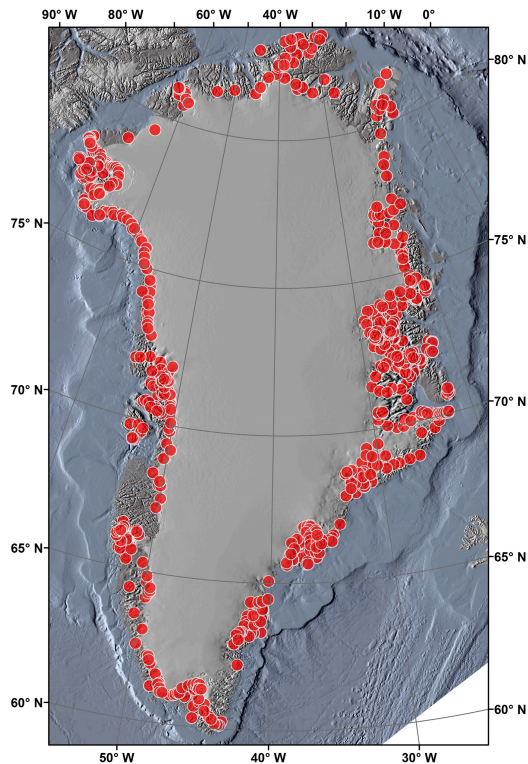
**Table 1.** Extraction from the glacier name database. All glaciers are represented with coordinates, and four possible names – the “New Greenlandic” is the official name, and if no such name exists the official name is the “Danish/Foreign”. Furthermore, not shown in this table is additional information related to the glacier’s location within a certain township, additional coordinates presented in UTM24, and a unique database ID.

Latitude	Longitude	New Greenlandic	Old Greenlandic	Danish/Foreign	Alternative suggestion
70.5454	−50.4897	Sermeq Avannarleq	Sermeq Avangnardleq	Lille Gletsjer	–
77.4220	−72.5149	Upernavissuup Sermia	Upernavigssup Sermia	Kissel Gletsjer	Upernavigguup Hermia
61.0080	−45.9067	–	–	Narsaq Bræ	–
64.2966	−49.6102	Kangiata Nunaata Sermia	Kangiata Nunáta Sermia	–	–
71.4193	−51.9240	Nunaarsussuup Kangiatungaani Sermikassak	–	–	–
69.1833	−49.8001	Sermeq Kujalleq	Sermeq Kujatdleq	Jakobshavn Isbræ	–

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**Figure 1.** Map of Greenland with all official glacier names plotted in red (733 glaciers in total). Glacier names concentrations are high in the populated areas and in areas that have been extensively explored – however, there are still fairly large stretches of coastline with no named glaciers (eg. the southeast and north coasts) Background image: IBCAO ver3.0 (Jakobsson et al., 2012).

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