

The following story was identified and offered by MCOM 105 student Nick Murdick:

Native Americans seek to outlaw the 'S-word'

by Laura Zuckerman *Sun Feb 25, 7:06 PM ET*

SALMON, United States (AFP) - Ruby Bernal wasn't self-conscious about her American Indian heritage until her adolescence, when a band of teenage boys called her "squaw" during a drive-by heckling.

"It's like saying the 'N-word' to a black person," says Bernal, a member of the Shoshone-Bannock, one of five tribes with reservations in Idaho.

"To me, it's a slap in the face. It belittles me and it belittles all Indian women."

Bernal is among Native Americans across the West fighting to excise "squaw" from the names of region's waterways, peaks and river valleys.

The 55 tribes of the Pacific Northwest say the "S-word," once commonly used when referring to an American Indian woman, is demeaning and never uttered on reservations.

They claim the term evokes the painful chapter in American history when Indian lands were confiscated and native peoples were subjugated by whites.

Yet the word litters the national map, with more than 800 place names including the word "squaw" and some resistance from local officials who object to what they say is a push to be politically correct.

Now one of the Northwest's most influential American Indian tribes is campaigning to wipe the word off the names of 11 creeks, bluffs and canyons in Idaho.

The gambling-rich Coeur d'Alene Tribe of northern Idaho argues the term is unsuitable for some of the area's most stunning landmarks and is asking the Idaho Geographic Names Advisory Council to recommend changing it.

Tribal leaders want "squaw" to be replaced by Coeur d'Alene terms such as "chimeash," which refers to a young woman of good character.

The ultimate decision will be in the hands of the US Board on Geographic Names and it will take months for the renaming to happen - if it does.

A key criterion used by the national board is whether the proposed changes have the backing of local governments. So far none of the Idaho counties have endorsed the proposed changes. Coeur d'Alene officials are proposing to strip "squaw" from four sites in Shoshone County. Local governments say there are many more pressing issues on their agendas than retooling place names.

"We're not prejudiced, I don't think, but what's the big deal?" said Lin Hintze, a member of the Custer County Commission in central Idaho, home to one of several "squaw peaks" in the state. "We have better things to do than make a big stink about a name."

A string of states, including Montana and Oregon - with the most "squaw" locations in the nation - have taken steps to remove the reference from their landscapes.

The push to remove "squaw" echoes the years-long effort by Indian activists to change what they say are the culturally insensitive titles and mascots borne by popular professional and college sports teams.

Landmarks in the West were dubbed "squaw" in the mid-19th century at the height of settlement driven by the discovery of gold.

The tension today between Indian advocates and diehard traditionalists has its roots in that era of westward expansion, which signaled the end of Indian autonomy, the forced adoption by tribes of Western European culture and a period in which native women were considered just one more commodity.

"Using the 'S-word' to refer to Indian women is just another reminder of this country's history of oppression of its native people," said Rozina George, a Lemhi Shoshone.

But Jeff Ford, former member of the Idaho names council, contends the push by tribes to excise "squaw" diminishes a landmark's historical significance.

"Just leave the names alone, for crying out loud," he said. "It's not meant to be demeaning and that term's been there forever. There must have been a reason for people of European descent to call places that. It probably wasn't a nice reason but we can't keep whitewashing history. A geographic name should reflect the story that brought it about."

While the US Board on Geographic Names has called the "N-word" and the term "Jap" taboo for place names and mandated changes, it has said "squaw" would be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

The Shoshone-Bannock's Bernal, for one, believes history is against tribes when it comes to having their agenda promoted.

"I think the broader society isn't responsive to our concerns because they never have been," she said.

"The native peoples have always been at the bottom of things and some people in this country are determined to keep us down there."