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## Offensive language still plagues Idaho; Legislators slow to make place names appropriate

art

by Morgan Winsor  
argonaut staff

calendar

Many Native American women refer to it as the "s" word. It's a five-letter, one syllable vindictive name they have hated for nearly two centuries.

letters

The word "squaw" is a hurtful word, offensive and degrading to Native American women, said Ruby Bernal, a Shoshone Bannock tribal member.

opinion

Yet the word litters Idaho's map.

sports

More than 93 locations in the state contain the word "squaw." And tribal members throughout Idaho want the name wiped off the map entirely.

archives

But that day may take a while to come. Twice now the state Legislature failed to pass a resolution to eliminate the word "squaw" from the state's federal map.

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The first resolution was killed by one vote last year. The second resolution went under the knife two months ago.

Instead of voting to approve the removal of the word "squaw," the house drafted a new resolution encouraging Idahoans to suggest changing offensive names that they think are offensive and present alternatives name changes to the State Historical Society.

Some Native American women are offended that the word "squaw" was removed from the resolution altogether.

"It was an easy way out," said Sonya Rosario, executive director of the Women of Color Alliance. "It takes the responsibility off them (politicians). They're playing it safe."

The meaning of the word "squaw" has deep roots in history, dating back to the mid-1800s when the white men who worked as trappers and hunters hiked through the region and traded goods for sexual services from women, whom they called "squaws."

Bernal, who works a payroll technician for the Boise National Forest, said the word refers to the genital area of women.

"It was a way to communicate between the white settlers," Bernal said. "When the white man wanted to have a woman for the night they would ask for a squaw. They traded horses, furs, guns, liquor and food."

Bernal, a member of the Inner Mountain American Indian Advisory Council for Region No. 4, said the word "squaw" has disturbed her since childhood.

"They (white males) would drive by while I was walking to school and yell the name (squaw) out the window at me," she said. "I don't want to worry about that happening to my children."

Lori Edmo-Suppah, a journalist-in-residence at the University of Idaho and a member of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribe, said the same name-calling happened to her as a youngster.

"The word was always used in a manner that was hurtful and degrading," Edmo-Suppah said.

Janet Ward, a member of the American Association of University Women, supports confiscating the name.

"We definitely support changing squaw names," Ward said. "And people have to realize that the name isn't just offensive to Native American women, it offends all women."

Bernal said abolishing the word is "highly controversial" and a "touchy subject" because some tribes, such as the Navajo, have accepted the word as part of their language.

Ward said the process of eliminating any offensive geographical name could be frustrating.

"The forms are complicated," she said. "And you need to have a lot of support."

But having enough support doesn't seem to be a problem when it comes to the 's' word.

"Most tribal members and leaders feel the same," Bernal said.

When and if the National Geographical Name Sight Board in Washington, D.C., does approve removing the name, Bernal said she'll begin her work first by changing some of the "really offensive geographic names on the map."

She said for example, Squaw Tit in Custer County and Squaw Hump in Benewah County will be the first names to go.

Montana, Oregon, Minnesota, Maine and Oklahoma have removed the names.

"Let's take the 's' word off all forest service maps," she said. "We need to make a difference in our life and for our kids."

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