

Charcoal — Kianiq

KIANIMEK PLIT'AAMI ATURTAARTUT. – THEY USE CHARCOAL IN THE STOVE.



Photo: A hearth in a 700 year old Alutiiq house,
Horseshoe cove site, 2004.

Charcoal, wood that has been reduced by fire, is a widely used resource. In the Alutiiq world, charcoal is important for cooking. Pits filled with burning coals were once used for slow-roasting foods. Elders report cooking fish wrapped in beach loveage and aluminum foil in hot coals, and at late prehistoric archaeological sites, large charcoal- and rock-filled pits are a common find in house floors. Elders suggest that people used these features for roasting meat. They recall digging pits in the beach, filling these pits with hot coals and heated rock, then covering the pits with gravel to slowly bake the food inside.

Alutiiq people also recognize charcoal for its medicinal qualities. People use charcoal scraped from burned devil's club root to create a fine powder. When mixed with milk this powder can be used as a poultice for treating eye inflammations. And in the past, ground charcoal was mixed with oil or blood to make black paint.

Today, charcoal has another important use: it can help archaeologists date ancient Alutiiq settlements. Because all organic matter contains a predictable amount of the radioactive isotope carbon 14, and because carbon 14 begins to decay with the death of an organism, scientists can measure the amount of carbon 14 remaining in an object to determine its age at death. Carbon dates, however, are not equivalent to calendar dates. Because the amount of cosmic radiation responsible for producing carbon 14 varies over time, carbon dates must be calibrated to reflect these changes and determine their correspondence with calendar dates.