

Crab — Iwalrayak (N), Sakuuq

AA'I, MAANI SAKUUT AMLERTAALLRIT. – YEAH, THERE USED TO BE A LOT OF CRAB AROUND HERE.



Photo: Fisherman with king crab. Nekeferof Collection.

Today, Alutiiq people enjoy eating dungeness, tanner, and king crab. But in the past, Kodiak's Native people avoided these ocean scavengers. Crab live on the ocean floor where they eat carrion, including the corpses of the drowned. For this reason, the crab was not a regular part of the traditional diet. This historically observed avoidance appears to be quite ancient. Although delicate, crab remains are not found in even the most exceptionally preserved archaeological sites.

The association between crab and death is reflected in the traditional practices of Alutiiq whalers, who harvested fat from human corpses to make spiritually potent whaling poisons. A historic account of this practice describes a whaler dressed as a crab removing a corpse from its grave. Like the crab that feeds on the dead, the whaler is using the corpse to secure a whale to feed his community. A mask with crab claws in place of a mouth, collected on Afognak Island by French anthropologist Alphonse Pinart, may be part of such a whaler's costume.