

Day — Erneq

ERNERET TAKLLIYUT. – THE DAYS ARE GETTING LONG.



Photo: Sunny day at Cape Alitak, May 2011

Spring in the Kodiak Archipelago brings lengthening days and warmer temperatures. As the sun reaches farther above the horizon, warming ocean waters stimulate plankton blooms that attract fish, birds, and sea mammals back to coastal environments. This yearly increase in daylight was once greatly anticipated by Alutiiq people. Longer days meant the renewed availability of fresh foods and more time for outdoor activities. Comparisons of seasonal daylight patterns illustrate the dramatic annual changes that influenced Alutiiq life. At the height of summer Kodiak experiences eighteen hours of daylight and the sun reaches a maximum angle of fifty-seven degrees above the horizon. In contrast, there are only six and a half hours of daylight separating sunrise and sunset in late December, and the angle of the sun dwindles to eight degrees.

Spring days were busy in Alutiiq communities. A typical day might have passed like this. A large family awakes in the cozy planked side rooms of their sod house. Crawling out of their heavy bearskin bedding, parents and children join aunts, uncles, and cousins for a meal of shellfish

collected the previous afternoon. In a warm breeze, the family packs their kayaks with freshwater and a modest supply of the remaining dried fish and seal oil from the previous summer's harvest. Children crawl into the bow of their parent's boats, where they lie and watch the water ripple past as their parents paddle. The family arrives at a small rocky island noisy with the screeches of nesting birds. Women and children collect from the easily accessible nests, looking for freshly laid eggs and leaving those with growing chicks. The men hike to the top of a nearby cliff. They rappel down the cliff face on tough sealion-skin ropes anchored by weighty rocks. They collect both eggs and birds, which are placed in baskets tied to their sides. After a snack of dried fish and oil, the women collect fresh greens growing along the beach edge, while the men watch for signs of migrating whales. Tired, the family returns to their community for a dinner of fresh vegetables, eggs, and bird meat. Community members visit on the beach where children play with toys that were stored over the long winter.