

Dolphin, Porpoise — Mangaq

MANGAT KIAGMI AMLERTAARTUT, PARAGUUTAMI MALIGKATURTAAKIIKUT. – THERE ARE ALWAYS A LOT OF DOLPHINS IN THE SUMMERTIME, THEY ALWAYS FOLLOW US IN THE BOAT.



Photo: Porpoise target piece carved of bark, Malina Creek site, Afognak Native Corporation collection. AM24.

The Pacific white-sided dolphin (*Lagenorhynchus obliquidens*) is a common resident of the deep waters surrounding Kodiak. The average adult is about seven and a half feet long, weighs three hundred pounds, and has a black back and beak, grey sides, and a white belly. These acrobatic sea mammals are gregarious. They travel in large groups, often with Dall porpoises and occasionally with baleen whales. Dolphins eat small schooling fish and squid and can live up to forty-five years.

Archaeological data and historic accounts indicate that Alutiiq people have hunted dolphins for millennia. However, they were among the most difficult sea mammals to capture. Dolphins are fast swimmers that range far from shore and only surface for a few seconds to breathe. Although they are noted bowriders and like to play around boats, they frighten easily. Historic accounts indicate that hunters pursued dolphins from kayaks. They used throwing boards loaded with special darts or bows and arrows to wound the animals. These weapons were designed to penetrate the animal's skin and fat. A struck animal dove immediately and the others in its pod disappeared.

Alutiiq people no longer hunt dolphins, except symbolically as carved miniature targets in a traditional dart game. One Elder says emphatically, "Don't shoot dolphins because they help you." This belief may come from Scandinavian folklore. Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish mariners who married into Alutiiq communities believed that dolphins were good luck and could guide a boat to safety in the fog.