

Fire — Keneq

KENEQ KUARNARPET. – WE CAN BUILD A FIRE.



Photo: Fire on the beach, Cape Alitak, Kodiak Island.

Large fires set in stone-lined hearths once warmed Alutiiq households. Alutiiq people lit these fires with wooden fire starters. These three-piece implements had a flat wooden platform (hearth) and a long shaft (spindle) that was rotated rapidly against the platform with a small bow. The friction caused by the movement of the shaft created an ember that people coaxed into a flame with a small bit of tinder. Wood shavings, birch bark, spruce pitch, and even bird down were used to feed the fire. Driftwood and woody brush then provided fuel for cooking, drying clothing, and heating, as well as light for indoor chores.

Analysis of charcoal from archaeological sites illustrates that people fueled their hearths with a variety of locally available woods. Many ancient fires were lit from brush. Alders, willow, and other woody shrubs were a main source of fuel for the island's earliest residents. Valuable driftwood logs were often reserved for building houses, boats, and fish-drying racks and for carving hunting and household tools.

Fire was also important to Alutiiq spiritual life. Men lit bundles of dried grass and spruce cones to please the spirit world and ensure hunting luck. And oil lamps have long been lit at gatherings to symbolize the enduring ties among Alutiiq people, their ancestors, and the natural world.