

Fish Rack — Initaq

IQALLUT INIKI INITAMEN. – HANG THE FISH ON THE FISH RACK.



Photo: Fish hanging on rack in Old Harbor, 1889.
Albatross Collection; National Archives, 22-FA-264

Fish racks are an essential feature of Alutiiq communities. Although salmon, halibut, and cod are abundant in Kodiak waters, each is seasonally available. Salmon return to the islands waters in great numbers in summer and fall, and ocean fish move closer to shore in warm weather and are easier to catch in the spring and summer months. To make efficient use of these resources, Alutiiq people harvest fish in quantity when they are available and process them for long-term storage. One popular method is drying—using the air and the sun to dehydrate fish flesh. Racks were important for the drying process.

Archaeological data suggest that people built fish racks both inside and outside structures. Post holes in village sites many thousands of years old, hint at the presence of racks, and the earliest historic photos from Kodiak show fish drying on long racks around sod houses. In the remains of some specialized structures, an abundance of small post holes, burned rocks, and charcoal suggest racks were set up inside to dry fish with fires and perhaps smoke.

Today, fish racks may be made from rough-cut lumber or from spruce poles, branches, or young tree trunks that have been carefully limbed. Upright poles form a brace for a long bar over which thin strips of fish or entire filets can be hung. Many people loosely cover their racks with plastic tarps, creating a roof to keep off Kodiak’s persistent rain. However, it is important not to cover the rack too tightly, or the fish will mold. The final touch is often a fishing net covering. The net’s open weave lets in the air and sun but keeps small scavengers away. The Alutiiq word for fish rack, *initaq*, literally means “something you hang something on.” The same word can be used for other kinds of racks, like a coat rack.