

Flipper — Itgaq (Literally, “foot”)

GUI WIINAM ITGAI PINGAKTAANKA. – I ALWAYS LIKE THE SEA LION’S FEET.



Photo: Whale breaching off of Cape Alitak, May 2010.

Sea mammals propel themselves through Alaska’s coastal waters with strong, sleek flippers. Flippers not only help animals swim, but they can also be important tools for exiting the water and moving on land. Seal and sea lion flippers, for example, have a tough rubbery surface that keeps the animal from sliding on slippery rocks.

Many coastal societies harvested sea mammal flippers for this nonslip quality, carefully removing the extremities from the seals, sea lions, and walruses they captured to make boots. In western Alaska, people also inflated sea lion flippers to use as net floats, and in the Aleutians, people boiled seal flippers to make a thick paste that served as glue.

The most common use for flippers, however, is as food. Across Alaska, flipper meat is roasted, boiled, stewed, and fried, creating meals that many people consider a delicacy. On Kodiak, Elders debate whether seal or sea lion flippers are the best tasting, but both are considered a treat. Be careful, though: if you haven’t eaten sea mammal meat in a while, the rich flipper meat can give

you gas.

Alutiiq people have several ways of cooking flippers. Some people pickle the meat. They boil it with onions and spice, remove the skin and bones, and store the meat in jars of vinegar. Others age the flippers for a short while or soak them in soda water overnight. Then they boil the flipper. When the skin comes off easily and the toenails fall out, the meat is ready to eat.