

Old Fish — Aakanaq

AAKANAT AMLERTAARTUT UKSUAKAARMI. – OLD SPAWNED-OUT FISH ARE PLENTIFUL IN THE EARLY FALL.



Photo: Children play with a dead salmon, Afognak Village area, ca. 1960. Chadwick Collection.

After growing to full size in the ocean, salmon return to freshwater to spawn. This journey is physically taxing. Salmon stop eating when they enter streams, relying on their stores of fat for energy to swim, build nests, and reproduce. Malnutrition, exhaustion, and physiological changes associated with spawning cause their bodies to change dramatically. The lithe, bright silvery fish found in the ocean fade and turn to red, green, brown, and even grey. Some species develop stripes or skin lesions. Others grow a hump, a hooked upper jaw, and jagged teeth.

There is a common misconception that salmon are inedible, perhaps even poisonous, once their bodies begin to decay. Alutiiq Elders report that this is simply not true. Although the texture of salmon flesh changes as fish deplete their energy stores, these fish are still a good source of food. Many Alaska Natives enjoy eating *aakanaq*—old fish.

Alutiiq Elders report that old fish have a more crumbly, white flesh, similar to the texture of canned tuna. This fish does not fry well, because it contains less oil, but it is very good to bake, boil, or dry. Old silver salmon make especially good dried fish. Old fish can also be eaten raw. Elders remember harvesting old red salmon from the Olga Lakes as late as March. People packed the fish back to Akhiok and cut thin, partially frozen slices of meat from their tails to eat raw. One Elder recalls his father eating silver salmon heads harvested from streams in winter. The fish heads were still good to eat, even if the remainder of the fish was gone. With two slices of bread, the gentleman had a quick and nutritious sandwich.