

Smoke — Puyuq

MECUUSQANEK KENERQAT PUYURNARTUU'UT. – WET FIREWOOD IS VERY SMOKY.



Photo: A smokey camp fire, Cape Alitak.

In Alutiiq communities, wood smoke is best known for its ability to flavor and preserve fish. Each family has its own special recipe for creating savory smoked salmon. Some rely on cottonwood, as both the bark and the wood of this widely available tree create lots of smoke and impart a wonderful flavor. Others prefer alder branches with the bark removed or birch wood. In the past, smoke was also used to process hides and fumigate houses. Burning branches will drive bugs from your home, and the smoke of seabeach sandwort will keep mosquitoes at bay.

Smoke was also used for medicinal and spiritual purposes. In Akhiok and Old Harbor, the leafy stems of crowberry shrubs were once burned in homes to prevent and cure illness. Visitors to these communities were asked to jump over burning plants and stand in their smoke. This destroyed diseases and chased away evil spirits.

Alutiiq people also used smoke to ritually clean contaminated objects. If a baby was accidentally born in a house or if a menstruating woman touched her husband's hunting gear, it was fumigated with smoke to restore its potency. Similarly, winter hunting ceremonies began by purifying the air with the smoke of burning grass, and to clear the air, a smoking torch preceded a corpse as it was carried outdoors for burial.