

Spear — Kepsuun, Panaq

PANAMEK IQALLUGNEK PIT'LLIANGA. – I GOT SOME FISH WITH A SPEAR.



Photo: Salmon spear points. Karluk One site, Koniag, Inc. Collection.

There are many ways to catch a salmon. Today, a pixie, a wet fly, or a gill net will do the trick, but before the introduction of treble hooks and monofilament, Alutiiq people used an ingenious salmon harpoon. Similar to pieces fashioned by Tlingit fishermen, this harpoon featured two articulating valves made of dense bone. One side of the valve was smaller than the other. These pieces were carved to fit together over a long bone foreshaft. With sinew, a fisherman bound the spear's components to a slender pole of flexible wood to create the complete weapon.

Fishermen standing in a stream thrust this weapon into passing salmon. People would block the stream with a simple stone or log weir and wait for a school of fish to appear. The spear was designed to completely penetrate the fish and then turn sideways. This kept the harpoon from tearing out of the soft flesh of the fish. After each successful catch, a fisherman would simply tie another harpoon to his spear and continue fishing.

This technology first appears in Kodiak's archaeological record at least six hundred years ago, at a time when a large number of Alutiiq people moved to Kodiak's salmon streams, increasing their annual harvest of salmon.