

Steam Bath Switch — Wainiik

TAARINGA WAINIMEK. – SWITCH ME WITH THE STEAM BATCH SWITCH.



Photo: An Alder bush on the shore of Olga Lake, Spring, 2005.

Switching is a common practice in Alutiiq steam baths. In the soothing, wet heat, people slap themselves with flexible branches to promote good health. This practice improves circulation, relieves aches and pains, and can be used to treat illness and prepare a pregnant woman for delivery. Pneumonia, difficulty urinating, and cramps are all ailments that Alutiiq people report treating with the help of switching. Banya switches can also be laid on a person to provide a medicinal effect, or used as a fan to cool the body.

Alutiiq people make switches from a great variety of plant materials. Alder and willow branches are the most common sources, although birch and red elderberry branches, and the stems of angelica, fireweed, fleabane, goldenrod, and large-leaf avens also provide switch material. Many people use leafy switches, particularly those who use alder branches. Alutiiq people often gather alder branches in the middle of the summer, as the young leafy branches of spring tend to be sticky with plant resins. Some tie harvested branches together and dry them. Others leave the branches in a damp place or put them in a freezer to keep the leaves from falling off.

People sometimes confuse the word for steam bath switch—*wainiik*—with the word for steam batch scrubber—*taariq*—a bundle of roots used like a loofa. This is because *taariq* is both a noun and a verb. It means scrubber and to switch with a *wainiik*.