

Talk Continuously — Niuwaluni, Yuwaluni

ALUTHIT'STUN NIUWANEQ PINGAKTAAQA. – I LIKE TO TALK THE ALUTHIQ LANGUAGE.



Photo: Kathy Nelson talks with Elder John Pestrikoff.

The Alutiiq language, the indigenous language of the Kodiak Archipelago, is known as Sugt'stun, which literally means “to speak like a person.” Although there are just a few handfuls of fluent Sugt'stun speakers in the Kodiak region today, Alutiiq people know that in any language, words can impact the world around them. Speaking is a powerful act.

In classical Alutiiq society, there were many restrictions on human speech. Alutiiq people had to be very careful with their words, because everything around them—animals, objects, rocks, flowers, clouds, and even mountains—is alive and aware of human conduct. Among the Chugach Alutiiq people, it was taboo to make noise when passing a dangerous place, to laugh at the convulsions of a dying animal, or to use the name of a recently deceased person until a newborn had been named for that person. These acts could anger spirits and imperil human lives. Words were also a source of power, and certain people were said to learn special words. For example, a person who knew the secret word belonging to the fire could make a blaze burn brighter, and a

person who knew the secret word for the sea swell could make the water calm.

One taboo on human speech that persists today is talking about bears. Kodiak Elders believe that bears are people who ran away from human society a long time ago and that bears remain particularly good at hearing and understanding human speech. A good hunter never talks about his preparation to kill bears or brags about his skill. This could ruin his luck and put him in danger, as a bear might be listening and become enraged. When a hunter approaches a bear, he must break his silence. He must speak to the animal, letting it know he needs its body. “We do this because we need you, not for fun.”