

Trash — Callret

CALLRET IMARMI PUGTAUT. – TRASH IS FLOATING IN THE OCEAN.



Photo: Mark Rusk in Uganik Bay by an eroding deposit of midden - ancient trash.

For Kodiak archaeologists, the old adage “one man’s garbage is another man’s treasure” holds true. During 7,500 years of island residence, Kodiak’s Native people left behind an abundance of cultural materials that have been preserved by the region’s persistently cool, wet climate. Scattered around their settlements, their middens provide an unusually rich picture of traditional lifeways. Alutiiq sites contain not only artifacts illustrating past activities but animal remains that reveal ancient subsistence practices, butchery patterns, food storage techniques, and even the character of Kodiak’s natural environment.

Clamshells, which are abundant in later prehistoric sites, are particularly informative. Like trees, clams produce annual growth rings, and these rings reflect the organism’s surrounding environment. During the summer, particularly from July to October when ocean waters are warmest, they grow rapidly, adding a wide, lightly colored band of calcium carbonate to the outer edge of their shell. During the succeeding cold months, growth halts as water temperatures drop and clams enter a resting phase. At this time of year, some of the recently produced shell is reabsorbed, creating a dark band of material and a distinctive notch on the surface of the shell. When a shell is cut open, archaeologists can observe these bands and notches and determine the season a clam was harvested. When compared with seasonal indicators in other animal remains, archaeologists can reconstruct not only what resources people were harvesting, but when. This helps in determining how people once used the landscape and how those uses have changed with time.