

## Tree Pitch, Chewing Gum — Angeq

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### ANGERMEK ATURTAAQAIT. – THEY USED TREE PITCH.

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Photo: Pitch oozing from the trunk of a Sitka spruce tree.

Alutiiq people used every part of the spruce tree, from its wood and roots to its needles and sticky pitch. When the bark of a spruce tree is ripped or cut, sap collects at the site of the injury. Alutiiq people recognize two different types of pitch, soft and hard, that form in a variety of colors: clear, white, yellow, pink, and even black.

The harder pitch, particularly the pink, yellow, and white varieties, makes the best chewing gum and tends to occur on older trees. Alutiiq Elders recall the fun of gathering pitch for gum. As children, some spent entire afternoons searching the forests for lumps of hardened sap, fighting over the pink pieces, which had the best flavor. Others remember chewing spruce gum so often that everything they ate tasted of spruce. Today, people use the hard pitch to make a tea to treat colds and coughs or apply warmed lumps of the soft yellow pitch to cuts to stop them from bleeding.

Like many Alaskans, Alutiiq people once used spruce pitch as a sealant. By mixing soft pitch with a little oil and heating it, they created a paste for waterproofing the seams of bark containers or temporarily fixing small holes in skin boats. The oil helped to keep the pitch from cracking as it dried. Spruce pitch can also help you start a fire. Like bark, wood shavings, or bird down, it is a good source of tinder.