

Whale Blubber — Kiimak

AKGUA'AQ KIIMAGTULLIAKUT. – WE ATE WHALE BLUBBER YESTERDAY.



Photo: Petroglyphs showing a pair of whales. Cape Alitak, Kodiak Island, May 2010.

Blubber, the thick layer of fat that lies between a whale's skin and its muscles, has important biological functions. Like all mammals, whales must maintain a warm body temperature. While swimming in icy waters, blubber keeps them warm by reducing the outward flow of heat; the colder the water, the thicker the layer of fat needs to be. Blubber is also lighter than water, so it provides buoyancy, offsetting the weight of heavier bones and muscles. It is also an important food source. Many whales do not feed during annual migrations, relying on their fat stores for months of sustenance.

Different whales produce different amounts of blubber. In the Gulf of Alaska, the larger species that range farther from shore tend to be fatter. These include blue, fin, right, and sperm whales. Twentieth-century commercial whalers targeted these animals for their valuable fat. When an animal was captured, workers cut its blubber into strips, melted it in industrial cookers, and sold the resulting oil for use in candles, cosmetics, and crayons.

In contrast, traditional Alutiiq whalers focused on harvesting the smaller, less fatty whales available closer to shore: humpbacks, minkes, and grey whales. These animals represented an enormous package of food and raw material, and their blubber was one of their biggest assets. Butchering a whale was a community affair. The process began by giving the whale a drink of fresh water, a task completed by the whaler's wife. Then villagers worked together to cut strips of blubber and meat from the carcass, a process that ended with a feast. Alutiiq people melted buried blubber in pits to liquefy naturally, or chewed it and spit the resulting oil into a container.