

Weatherman — Llaatesurta

LLAATSURTAALLRIIT. – THEY USED TO BE WEATHERMEN.



Photo: Weatherman mask, ca. 1872, Pinart Collection.
Courtesy of the Château-Musée, Boulogne-sur-Mer,
France.

Long before marine radios, the nightly, television weather report, weather apps and weather cams, Alutiiq people interpreted the weather by reading the wind, waves, clouds, and phase of the sun and moon. Shaman, men and women skilled at interacting with the unseen world, were weather specialists. Harvesters and travelers consulted these knowledgeable people before leaving home and adjusted their plans accordingly.

Understanding the weather, especially the behavior of the wind, remains an essential skill in Alutiiq communities. Today, the weather is a central topic of conversation, and accurate weather information helps people order their daily lives and stay safe. The weather affects everything from the ability to hunt, fish, and collect, to the arrival of the mail plane. Interpreting weather conditions is a difficult business, as conditions vary across the landscape and can change quickly. This means that people must know how a set of conditions affects different areas of the island.

Alutiiq weather lore is particularly rich in knowledge of the wind and its effects on water and animal behavior. The Alutiiq language reflects this detailed perception. Alutiiq speakers use a great number of terms to discuss the direction, speed, intensity, and duration of winds. Other words describe the noises the wind makes or the relationships between the wind and the landscape. For example, a speaker might report that the wind is whooshing, or use a word that describes the wind as blowing from the east and out of a bay.