

## Bubbles — Qapuk

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### ARHNAM QAPUWAIT PUGTARTAARTUT. – SEA OTTER'S BUBBLES ALWAYS FLOAT UP.

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Photo: Painted, miniature work board, showing a swimming sea otter. Koniag, Inc. collection, Karluk One.

In the Alutiiq language, the term *qapuk* has several meanings. It can be used to describe froth, foam, or scum—like a film of algae that forms over a pond, or the layer of scum that rises to the top of a pot when you cook meat. Karluk villagers used *qapuk* as the word for pumice—the pale grey, porous, floating stone created by volcanic eruptions. More commonly, however, you will hear the term used to mean bubble—a pocket of air trapped in liquid.

Understanding the way bubbles move in water was part of an Alutiiq hunter's education. When birds and animals dive, air trapped in their fur and feathers escapes and forms a trail. Similarly, as animals exhale underwater, bubbles rise to the surface. Hunters who watch the water carefully can see air bubbles reaching the surface and locate their prey.

This technique was particularly important in communal sea otters hunting. Teams of men working in kayaks hurled their arrows at a sea otter each time it surfaced to breathe. Watching the trail of bubbles left by the animal, they could judge the direction it was moving and anticipate where it might surface again. An ancient painting from the village of Karluk records this important piece of knowledge. A small skin working board shows a swimming otter with bubbles streaming off its coat.