

Dentalium Shell — Aimhnaq

UKUT KULUNGUAT AIHMNANEK CANAMAUT. – THESE EARRINGS ARE MADE FROM DENTALIUM SHELLS.



Photo: Students with dentalium shell earrings made at the Alutiiq Museum.

Dentalium, the long, slender white shells Alutiiq people used for jewelry and decoration, come from scaphopods, a type of hollow-shelled mollusks. The name dentalium is derived from the Latin word *dentis*, meaning tooth. Aply, dentalium are sometimes referred to as tusk shells as they are whitish and gently curved.

There are two types of dentalium found along the Pacific coast of North America. The most common, and the only type found in Southeast Alaska and Western Canada, is the Indian money tusk (*Denatium pretiosum*). These one-footed creatures burrow into seafloor sediments where they feed on microscopic organisms. They often grow beneath deep waters, but can also be found close to shore.

Dentalium are particularly common around Vancouver Island, where Native people once harvested them with weighted, broom-like tools. By dragging the broom across the seafloor, fishermen trapped dentalium in its bristles.

Native Alaskans fished for dentalium shells in the Copper River area and in several locales in Southeast Alaska. G.I. Davydov, a Russian Naval Officer, reported that the Tlingit harvested dentalium near the Charlotte Islands by immersing a human corpse in the water for several days. When they retrieved the body, dentalium would be clinging to it. Trade in dentalium shells is also well-documented, with shells traveling great distances from the Northwest Coast to places like interior Alaska, Kodiak, and the Aleutian Islands.

Empty dentalium shells are ideal for beading, as they have a hole at each end. Alutiiq people sewed dentalium shells to hats and used them in beaded earrings, bracelets, necklaces, and headdresses, and as nose pins. The shells were considered very valuable, and their use maybe hundreds of years old. Pebbles incised with drawings of people more than 500 years ago seem to show dentalium shell necklaces.