

Sitkinak Island — Sigtunaq

ARWEGET SIGTUNAMEN AG'UT. – THE WHALES ARE SWIMMING TO SITKINAK ISLAND.



Photo: The lagoon in central Sitkinak Island.

Sitkinak is one of the Trinity Islands, a group of three large, windswept, grassy islands off the southern coast of Kodiak. Sitkinak is the largest. It stretches about 30 km east to west, forming the southern boundary of Sitkinak Strait. Here, whales pass close to shore on their annual migration to the Bering Sea. The interior of Sitkinak is mountainous. However, the island's shores feature long sandy beaches and a large, protected lagoon that nearly cuts the island in half. Both are excellent landing places for boats.

Although archaeological data suggest there were once a number of ancestral settlements on Sitkinak, just two are mentioned in historic records, Ubaguik and Ikuk. Both communities were located on the northwestern shore of the island, behind a broad expanse of beach overlooking Sitkinak Strait. Whalebones and pottery vessels for melting blubber fill the remains of these settlements. Alutiiq ancestors strategically positioned these villages for whaling.

Russian traders had visited both communities by 1795. At that time, Ubaguik was the larger village, with about two hundred residents. Here, Russian traders conscripted Alutiiq men for bird hunting. Ikuk, later known as Sitkhinak village, was home to about 150 people. There is little information on either village and the available notes provide a disturbing view of the sickness and death that characterized the early nineteenth century. One Elder, Vasilisa Kinuak, a 68-year old woman from Ubaguik composed a song about the widespread loss of life. She asked, "Why do I lament, this death is everywhere? Why do I grieve, this death is everywhere?"

Following the 1838 smallpox epidemic, Russian American Company officials relocated survivors from Sitkinak to Aiaktalik village on neighboring Aiaktalik Island. They were joined by the survivors from Tugidak, Kaguyak, and Kashkak