

Vertebra — Iiwaq

GUI IIWANKA ANGQ'RTAARTUT. – MY VERTEBRAE ALWAYS HURT.



Photo: Worked halibut vertebrae, Clyda Christiansen Collection.

To Alutiiq people, the careful use of natural resources is an essential part of perpetuating human life. By demonstrating respect for the plants and animals, people ensure that resources will continue to be available. This reverent interaction of the natural environment was expressed in many ways. Elders recall that sea mammals were not hunted when pregnant, that people only harvested what they needed, and that a hunter had the obligation to use every part of the animals he took. Waste of any kind would offend the animal's spirit and bring bad luck. This belief is reflected in the traditional use of animal parts that many people discard today—like fish vertebrae.

The Alutiiq once fashioned rings from of halibut vertebrae. These boney discs, which can reach the size of a silver dollar, were cut apart to separate the circular, concave ends from the vertebrae. The centers of the resulting circular pieces were then cut out to form a thin ring. The rough edges of these rings were smoothed, probably with a small piece of pumice or sandstone. Archaeologists often find these rings in clusters, suggesting that they were strung together and used as beads.