

Crab Pot — Sakursuuteq (S), Iwalrayagsuun (N)

ALLRANI SAKURSUUT'MEK IKUGTAARTUKUT QUTMEK. – SOMETIMES WE FIND CRAB POTS AT THE BEACH.



Photo: Crab pots stored on the coast of Three Saints Bay, AM726.

The Alutiiq words for crab pot translate as “tool for getting crab”. Today, these large steel and wire devices are a common sight on boat decks, in people’s yards, and stacked along the shore. There are different varieties of crab pots, each carefully designed to trap a particular species. Whatever their type, crab pots are a relatively recent addition to Kodiak fishing technologies. The focused harvesting of crabs is only about 70 years old.

In classical Alutiiq society, crab was not a regular part of the diet. People avoided these seafloor creatures as they eat carrion and are associated with death. Alutiiq ancestors may have harvested crab in emergencies, recognizing the crustaceans as a food source. But crab remains are very rare in ancestral Alutiiq settlements, with just one example from Kodiak. In a 250-year-old garbage pile on the coast of Kiliuda Bay archaeologists recovered a fragment of a crab pollex—the toothed, lower finger of a claw. Still, it is impossible to determine if this fragment represents purposeful harvesting. It could have been dropped by a bird or accidentally introduced to the site in a basket of seaweed or mussels.

The commercial crab fishery changed the relationship between Alutiiq people and crab harvesting. The Japanese began harvesting and canning crab in the last 19th century. The practice spread across coastal Alaska in the 1920s and 1930s. However, the complexity of processing live crab made it a difficult and costly enterprise. Experimentation and innovation led to the rapid growth of the Kodiak crab industry in the 1950s. Fishermen started harvesting near their villages. They learned to convert seiners to crabbers. They experimented with net fishing and eventually moved to pots. And before boats had holds filled with seawater, they built live boxes. Alutiiq fisherman Paddy Mullan remembered building a wooden box to tow beside the boat.