

Cockle, Clam — Qahmaquq, Mamaayaq

QAHMAQURYUGTUA. – I WANT SOME COCKLES.



Photo: Christina Lukin opening clams. Afognak Village, ca. 1960. Chadwick Collection.

Kodiak's shores are encrusted with a wealth of intertidal organisms. Clams, cockles, whelks, mussels, sea urchins, chitons, limpets, and periwinkles are all available in quantities. Alutiiq people harvested these resources throughout the year, but they were particularly important in the late winter and early spring. This was a time when food stores were exhausted and fresh foods were hard to find. Shellfish was an accessible, abundant food that could be collected by anyone. A digging stick, an open weave basket, and a leisurely walk on the beach were the only harvesting requirements. Today, some communities take advantage of low winter tides, harvesting shellfish in the dark by the light of kerosene lamps. According to Alutiiq Elders, "when the tide is out, the dinner table is set."

Alutiiq people continue to enjoy shellfish, although they are wary of the red tide. Algae that carry a deadly nerve toxin can easily contaminate clams and other filter feeders.

These algae can be present at any time of year and are difficult to detect. How did coastal peoples avoid the red tide? It wasn't by shunning shellfish. Village sites from Attu to Ketchikan contain abundant evidence of clam dinners. Perhaps villagers took their clues from the birds and fish that are also affected by the poison or avoided clams from areas known to produce illness. Native place names like Poison Cove warn of beaches with deadly shellfish. Whatever the answer, their technique remains a mystery.