Artifact Trafficking

A few years ago, Alutiiq Museum archaeologists opened their emails and discovered a link to eBay. While browsing the popular online market, a colleague made an unexpected discovery, artifacts from Kodiak offered for sale. Someone in Oregon was auctioning a collection of archaeological finds from the community of Karluk. There were stone wood working tools, carved bone fishing implements, ground slate lances, glass trade beads, and a pebble etched with a human face. The suggested starting bid for these antiquities was $5.00. Museum archaeologists immediately suspected a case of artifact trafficking.

What was wrong with this situation? A lot.

First, while you can truly purchase most anything on eBay, some items cannot be legally bought or sold. Artifacts often fall in this category. Archaeological finds belong to the owners of the land on which they occur. Native organizations and the US government own most of the land surrounding the Karluk River, so it was likely that the eBay collection was illegally obtained. Offering such artifacts for sale, or purchasing them, is artifact trafficking under federal law.

Second, the seller was in Oregon, indicating that someone had moved the collection. Like collecting and selling artifacts you don’t own – it is illegal to transport such objects or to receive them. Transporting and receiving stolen antiquities are also considered artifact trafficking.

Third, the artifacts represent pieces of Kodiak Alutiiq heritage. Selling them removes them from the community, and it fuels the market for antiquities that leads to further site looting and the loss of cultural information. Even if it weren’t illegal to sell these items, it is damaging and disrespectful.

Luckily, eBay has a strict policy against artifact trafficking. A call to the Alaska Office of History and Archaeology led to consultation with eBay officials, and the quick removal of the collection from the Internet. We don’t know what happened to the items, but they illustrate the need for a community repository, a place where objects can be safely held for everyone.

If you find an artifact remember to leave it in place – enjoy it on the landscape but don’t bring it home. Like an archaeologist you must have permission to collect artifacts. Contact the Alutiiq Museum. We can talk to landowners about how to care for finds and record their locations, so the information they hold is preserved forever.
YOU CAN HELP

Never dig in a site or collect artifacts from the beach.

If you find an artifact, enjoy it but leave it. Take a photograph but not the object.

Teach your family and friends to respect artifacts. Most people do not know that it is illegal, destructive, and disrespectful to collect artifacts.

Report illegal collecting to the National Park Service (1-800-478-2724). Rewards of up to $500 are available for information on illegal collecting.

RESPECT THE PAST

What is artifact trafficking?
Artifacts trafficking is the sale, purchase, exchange, transport, or receipt of illegally obtained artifacts.

Who can legally sell artifacts?
The only people who can legally sell an artifact are its owners. In the United States, artifacts are the property of land owners. They belong to the people or organizations who own the land on which artifacts occur. If you take an artifact from land that does not belong to you, the artifact does not belong to you. Selling, buying, trading, accepting, or even transporting such artifacts is also a crime.

What are the penalties for artifact trafficking?
Under federal law, trafficking can result in fines of up to $20,000 and 2 years in jail for a first offense. Offenders can also lose equipment and vehicles used while committing the offense.

Learn More On Line:
http://illicit-cultural-property.blogspot.com/
http://culturalpropertylaw.wordpress.com/

Quyanaasinaq – Many thanks to our 2010 Stewards

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Zoya Saltonstall with a line sinker preserved from State of Alaska lands in 2010.


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