Browsing a shop in Seattle, Jodi White saw something that didn’t look right. Resting on velvet-covered boards in a mirrored-case were prehistoric Alaskan artifacts, each with a price tag. Hand written cards described the objects and asked customers to spend hundreds of dollars to own a piece of Native history. Confused, Jodi shared the situation with her mother Alicia Komm, who contacted the Alutiiq Museum. “Isn’t the sale of artifacts illegal?” asked Komm.

The answer is complicated. Artifacts and ancient animals remains from private lands can be collected and sold, if the landowner provides permission. However, it is always illegal to collect and sell artifacts from public lands. Whether intentional or not, many of the artifacts that end up on the market are stolen.

Looking at the objects displayed in Seattle it is not possible to tell if they were legally obtained. We don’t know their precise origin or how they arrived in the store. The storeowner may not know either.

Unfortunately, this is not an unusual situation. Browse gifts shops in Alaska and you will see baskets with ancient pieces of carved ivory, stone tools glued to paper tags, or jewelry made from bone carvings. Websites offering Alaskan artifacts also abound. Some of these materials are fakes. Others represent systematic efforts to profit from the sale of Native history, often with little benefit to the Native communities.

What does this mean for shoppers? First, don’t buy artifacts. You can’t be sure you are participating in a legal transaction. Moreover, the sale of artifacts fuels the antiquities market and leads to the destruction of Native settlements. When people vandalize sites for objects to sell, they disturb houses, graves, and the record Native history. Even if it’s legal, this is an unethical and disrespectful practice.

Second, follow Komm’s example. Ask questions if you see artifacts for sale. Understand the laws that protect Alaska’s past and share them with your family and friends.
Your Questions Answered:

Why shouldn’t I buy artifacts?

• Artifacts offered for sale may be stolen property.
• Prehistoric sites and the artifacts they hold are a nonrenewable resource. Buying artifacts fuels the market for antiquities and leads to the destruction of additional sites and the history they hold.
• Some of the most important information about an artifact comes from its position in a site. When artifacts are removed from sites, this information is lost.
• Artifacts have stories to tell. Privately held artifacts are not available for study and inspiration. When Elders, artists, scientists, and historians have access to artifacts, they can share valuable information.
• Privately held artifacts are often damaged, lost, or destroyed.

Learn More On Line:
Fossil Collecting & Artifact Hunting in Alaska
http://www.alaskacenters.gov/fossil-collecting.cfm

YOU CAN HELP

Never dig in or collect artifacts from an archaeological site.

If you find a site, enjoy it, but leave it. Take photographs not objects.

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

Report illegal collecting, site vandalism, and artifact trafficking to the National Park Service (1-800-478-2724). Rewards of up to $500 are available for information.

Quyanaasinaq – Many Thanks
2012 Archaeological Site Stewards

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Artifacts found and deposited at the Alutiiq Museum for care. Alutiiq Museum photo.