Discovering the Past
Exploring Culture
Awakening Pride
The Alutiiq Museum

Dentalium Shell Earrings
Make your own Alutiiq earrings!

Kulunguai cucumartuk. – Her earrings are pretty.

How long have Alutiiqs worn earrings? Archaeological data suggest that this practice is very old. Beads and other jewelry began appearing on Kodiak about 2,700 years ago.

In historic times, both men and women wore earrings. Russian accounts suggest that used valuable materials to make their jewelry to illustrate their wealth and social position. Common materials included handmade beads of coal, amber, ivory, stone, clam shell, and slender dentalium shells, as well as glass trade beads.

MATERIALS:
Dentalium shells, beads, wire cutters, round-nose jewelry pliers, 2 earring hooks, 2 earring head pins.

Alutiiq Vocabulary
Kulunguaq – Earring
Salaq – Shell
Pinguaq – Bead

Dentalium shell earrings by LaRita Laktonen.
INSTRUCTIONS:
1. Place one long piece of dentalium shell onto head pin. Head pins have flat heads on the bottom that hold beads in place.

2. Add one or more beads above or below the shell to accent the white color. Experiment with color combinations!

3. Leave about ¼ inch of space on head pin. Using round nose pliers, bend head pin wire to create a 90-degree loop.

4. Add an earring hook before you close the loop, then bend the wire over to secure the hook in place.

5. Duplicate the earring to make a pair.

Kulunguaqa kataigiiyaqa! – I dropped my earring!

Makut pinguat cucunartut. – These beads are beautiful.

Dentalium Shells
Some shells were particularly coveted for jewelry and decoration. Alutiiqs obtained dentalium shells, the curved, white, tusk-shaped shells of scaphopods in trade with the societies of Southeast Alaska. Scaphopds are types of marine mollusks.

These shells were considered extremely valuable. Historic sources indicate that a pair of delicate dentalium shells could be traded for an entire squirrel skin parka!