Ancient Alutiiq Rock Art Found on Afognak Island

On a recent trip to Afognak Island, Alutiiq Museum archaeologist Patrick Saltonstall identified a rare cluster of rock art, a set of petroglyphs previously unknown to the Alutiiq community. Pecked into the surface of a rock formation on the southern shore of Afognak, he found a series of carefully formed circular pits, about the size of a tablespoon, some encircled by a pecked line. The pits, about a dozen, stretch about four feet along a rock face, roughly in a line. Incised lines may also be present, although additional study is needed to fully document the rock art’s graphic elements.

“Andy Christofferson, the Senior Land Patrol Officer at the Afognak Native Corporation, took me to the area in the corporation’s boat to investigate an old report of petroglyphs,” said Saltonstall. “I found one area where I thought there might be faint depressions, but I wasn’t convinced. After looking around a bit, I went back to that area. It had started raining and the petroglyph jumped out at me! The wet rock made them easier to see.”

The Kodiak Archipelago is known for its rock art, an art form rare in many regions of Alaska. The best known examples of Kodiak petroglyphs are from Cape Alitak, where the Alutiiq Museum researchers recorded more than 1,300 images in 2010. Yet, Afognak Island also has a number of smaller petroglyph clusters, places where human faces and geometric designs are carved into stationary boulders facing the water. Researcher believe that this art form is at least 600 years old based on the apparent association of village sites with some of the petroglyph locales, and the age of artifacts incised with similar designs.

“These petroglyphs are another example of our ancestors’ graphic arts,” said Alutiiq Museum Executive Director Dr. April Laktonen Counceller. “They are a rare and important find, one that connects Alutiiq visual symbols across time. Circles, especially concentric circles, are iconic of the Alutiiq universe. Our ancestors saw the world a multi-layered space, with a series of sky worlds and undersea worlds. If you look carefully at historic Alutiiq baskets, embroidery, and other art forms, you will see this layering. Petroglyphs and artifacts with similar designs confirm that this worldview has great antiquity.”
Saltonstall’s archaeological research on Afognak Island is part of a multi-year partnership between the Alutiiq Museum and the Afognak Native Corporation to document ancestral sites on the corporation’s lands. Grant funds from the National Park Service Tribal Heritage Preservation Funds are allowing museum researchers to study shoreline areas, documenting the condition of known sites and searching for previously unrecorded evidence of cultural activity, like the recently identified petroglyphs.

“The archaeological survey is a chance for Afognak to learn more about the cultural resources in its care,” said Afognak Native Corporation Senior Vice President for Community and Government Affairs, Dr. Alisha Drabek. “Only a few areas of our corporation lands have been surveyed by an archaeologist. By identifying the sites on our land, and by studying the condition of known sites, we can plan for their preservation. We can also learn more about our rich past. We are very excited by this find. It reminds us that there is still a lot to be learned from Afognak archaeology, as information has passed beyond the living memory of our community. This project is helping us bring that knowledge back to our people.”

The Alutiiq Museum is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and sharing the history and culture of the Alutiiq, an Alaska Native tribal people. Representatives of Kodiak Alutiiq organizations govern the museum with funding from charitable contributions, memberships, grants, contracts, and sales.

Photograph Attached: Recently identified petroglyphs on the shore of Afognak Island. Photograph by Patrick Saltonstall, courtesy the Alutiiq Museum.