Respecting Human Remains

Kodiak Alutiiq people buried their dead in their communities, interring family members around villages. With the exception of spiritually powerful shamans, ancestors were kept close to the living. This practice reflects Alutiiq concepts of time, and the importance people place on caring for relatives. To Alutiiqs, the past is not distant. It is an active part of the present.

In the Alutiiq world, ancestors remain members of contemporary society through their connections to family and through the stories, legends, songs, dances and artwork they have bestowed to the world. Caring for ancestral remains, therefore, is one important way Alutiiqs show respect for their families, their communities, and their culture.

Today, as rain, waves, and wind reshape Kodiak’s coastline, many old Alutiiq villages are melting into the sea. As a result, burials are unearthed. It is not uncommon to find human remains on Kodiak’s beaches or to see human bones eroding from coastal bluffs. For decades beachcombers have collected these remains as curiosities, taking them home and even selling them. Others have dug in archaeological sites disturbing burials and removing bones. This is very distressing to Alutiiq people who believe that their ancestors’ remains and graves deserve the same respect as those buried in Western style cemeteries.

In 1991, the Federal Government agreed, passing the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. It is now illegal to disturb Native American graves, or to collect Native American remains. Archaeologists must work with Native peoples to obtain permission for research with the potential to disturb graves.

Site stewards often ask what to do if they observe human remains. Never disturb human remains. Report the find to the Alaska State Troopers, who will determine the next step.
What do I do if I find Human Remains?

In Alaska it is a crime to intentionally disturb human remains on anyone’s land. A person who accidentally uncovers human remains and stops digging is not guilty of a crime. A person who intentionally uncovers remains or continues to dig after accidentally finding remains can be charged with a felony. Other regulations governing the treatment of discovered human remains depend on the place the remains occur, their antiquity, and their biological and cultural affiliations. NEVER collect human remains. Like sites and artifacts, human remains and graves are protected by law.

Prehistoric Human Remains – Human remains more than 100 years old are considered archaeological, and they are protected by the Archaeological Resources Protection Act and for Native remains, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. It is illegal to damage, remove, or sell any archaeological material over 100 years old on federal public lands. This includes human remains. Violations are punishable with fines of up to $250,000, five years in jail, and seizure of all tools, equipment, and vehicles used in the offense. Report any suspected prehistoric remains to the Alaska State Troopers or the Alutiq Museum.

Learn more:

Military Human Remains – The U.S. Military has the authority and the obligation to recover the remains of lost servicemen. If you discover military human remains contact the Alaska State Troopers.

Recent or Unknown Human Remains – Human remains less than 100 years old are considered recent. Report any discoveries to the Alaska State Troopers.

Alaska State Troopers – Kodiak Post 486-4121

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Incised pebble from the Outlet Site, Buskin River – US Coast Guard Collection, Alutiq Museum, AM327
Drawing by April Laktonen Counciller

Uganik Bay Site Monitors – Chris Myrick, Jenny Myrick, Sue Jeffery, Adelia Myrick