The Gulf of Alaska lies on the migratory path of the Pacific Ocean’s great baleen whales. Blue, fin, sei, humpback, and gray whales swim by Kodiak each year on their way to and from feeding grounds in the Bering Sea. These annual spring and fall migrations brought some species within reach of Alutiiq kayaks. Although challenging to harvest, they were an important subsistence resource. Even a small animal could feed a community for weeks. Whales also provided bone for tools, baleen for baskets, sinew for thread and cordage, and flexible membranes for clothing.

Historic accounts reveal that whalers were a select group of powerful people. Hunting was done from kayaks by men armed with slate lances dipped in a potent nerve poison. Hunters focused on the animals passing closest to shore, particularly those that stopped to rest and feed in coastal fjords. Gray whale cows with their newborn calves, humpbacks and fin whales were among those targeted, particularly the smaller, more easily killed animals. Once speared, the animals were left to die and wash ashore, a process that took several days. Dead whales were given a drink of fresh water and then butchered on the beach. People anointed themselves with fat and blood to honor the animal and show their gratitude for its sacrifice. This ensured future whaling success.

**A WHALING SONG**

After I have killed you, do you want to see me dance?
I would not feel bad if the whale dived with me!
I would not let the whale dive with me!
After I have killed the whale, he will feel fine with all the people around here!

Sung by Prince William Sound hunters after spearing a whale.
(from Kaj Birket-Smith, the Chugach Eskimo, 1953:35)

*Whale petroglyph from Cape Alitak, Kodiak, Island.*

**LEARN MORE:**


Among the Alutiiq people, whaling was a dangerous activity, shrouded in secrecy and steeped in magic. Whalers were a special class of men, who lived apart from everyday society. They were considered dangerous, more like spiritual entities than human beings, for their ability to land enormous sea mammals. The title of whaler was hereditary and passed through certain elite families. Each whaler maintained a secret cave where he stored hunting gear and prepared for the chase. Here he acted out hunts with model kayaks and prepared deadly hunting poisons.

The pulverized root of the Monkshood plant (Latin: *Aconitum delphinifolium*), a herb with many blue, helmet-shaped flowers, was a central ingredient in these poisons. This plant contains a powerful toxin that can paralyzed the nervous system and dangerously lower body temperature and blood pressure.

To this chemically potent plant, whalers added spiritually powerful human fat. On Kodiak, fat was taken from the mummified remains of whalers, or stolen from the remains of a male child. When spread on whaling lances, this magical poison was strong enough to paralyze small whales and keep them from fleeing into open water.

In addition to poisoned spears, whalers carried amulets. Talismans included eagle feathers, bear hair, berries, roots, and luminous green stones. Collected privately, each hunter stored his charms in a small bag. A story from Afognak Island tells of the great success of a whaler who found a green stone. However, when the hunter fell in love and lost the stone, he could no longer kill game. He and his beloved died shortly afterwards.