Study of Ancestral Alutiiq Technology Funded

A $49,982 grant to Koniag, Inc. from the Institute for Museum and Library Services will fund a unique Alutiiq Museum collections project, the development of an Alutiiq Technological Inventory. The museum will use grant funds to identify and describe all the major prehistoric artifact types in its care, an estimated 300 kinds of tools. The project’s goal is to create a manual that can be used by staff and volunteers to accurately describe ancient Alutiiq artifacts as they are cataloged and studied. Alutiiq Elders will contribute to the process by providing Alutiiq language terms for each tool type, so that objects can be labeled with culturally appropriate terms in displays, publications, and storage areas.

“We want to formalize and record the system of artifact identification we developed over the past twenty years,” said Chief Curator Amy Steffian. “This will help us to insure artifacts are accurately identified by staff and volunteers. We can also share the inventory with researchers studying Alutiiq history and museums with Alutiiq collections. It’s often difficult to identify ancient tools. Our manual will promote accurate, respectful care and interpretation of Alutiiq objects, and it can be expanded as new finds are made.”

As a companion resource, the museum will create a raw material identification kit. Staff members will assemble examples of about one hundred stone, bone, shell, and other raw materials types represented in its collections and describe them. Curator of Archaeology Patrick Saltonstall explains.

“It can be really hard to determine the material used to make an artifact,” he said, “but materials type is a very rich piece of information. By understanding the materials people selected, and how those materials were used, we can often reconstruct patterns of trade and manufacture. This helps us to understand past economies.”

The two-year project begins this month. When the artifact inventory manual and raw materials kit are assembled, the museum will test them with volunteers. Copies will also be shared with other organizations that care for Alutiiq objects and with archaeologists who work in the region.

“If other people can use these resources to identify artifacts, then we’ve done our job,” said Saltonstall.

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.