Alutiiq Word of the Week Turns Twenty

This week marks the 20th anniversary of the Alutiiq Word of the Week, the Museum’s lessons on all things Alutiiq. From aakanaq (old fish) to yataaq (poison), the word of the week pairs an Alutiiq word and sentence with a short lesson on Alutiiq traditions. Since its debut on July 6, 1998, the museum has developed 546 lessons shared on KMXT Public Radio and through print and digital resources.

“The Alutiiq Word of the Week is our most enduring program,” said the museum’s Executive Director April Laktonen Counceller. “It was one of our first programs to highlight the Alutiiq language, and it has helped to draw attention to Alutiiq history, culture, and issues. It's a big undertaking to produce a weekly lesson, but with tremendous support from Alutiiq Elders, KMXT, and the Daily Mirror, the program is helping to reawaken community awareness of Alutiiq heritage.”

The program has changed since its inception, growing beyond the original radio show and FAX broadcast. In now includes a weekly email broadcast, social media posts with images from the museum’s collections, an iTunes podcast, and links to audio files. “People wanted access to pronunciations for the Alutiiq words we share, so we now link recordings of Elder speakers to lessons posted online,” said Counceller.

Lesson content has also evolved. “At the start, we focused largely on classical Alutiiq society,” said Amy Steffian, the museum’s chief curator and lesson writer. “There was so little reliable, accessible information on Alutiiq heritage, we wanted to reawaken knowledge of the past. Over the years, we’ve expanded the lessons to include recent history and modern traditions. The word of the week is one of the places where the museum actively interprets today’s Alutiiq world.”

What hasn’t changed is public response to the lessons. The word of the week generates more traffic to the museum’s website than other resources and positive comments from social media followers. Why do people enjoy the lessons? The museum works to infuse them with unique, interesting information and a touch of Alutiiq humor. “Where else can you read about Spam in Alutiiq traditions,” said Counceller.

In celebration of the program’s anniversary, and the launch of its twentieth season, the museum has been sharing staff picks of their favorite lessons on its Facebook page. Although
Steffian has a few personal favorites, she notes that the lesson on *Pukuk*—To Salvage is an audience pleaser.

“The word doesn’t have an exact English translation. It means to salvage but in an industrious, resourceful way. It means to acquire something for free, or to borrow something permanently! And the *pukuk* lesson shares the true story of a young man who acquired a bicycle!”

A searchable archive of past Alutiiq Word of the Week lessons is available on the museum’s website at https://alutiiqmuseum.org/word-of-the-week-archive. Patrons can also sign up for the weekly email broadcast on the museum’s website or visit the iTunes store to subscribe to the program podcast.

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.