Respecting Rock Art

The Kodiak Archipelago has an unusually rich collection of ancient rock art. Alutiiq ancestors carved hundreds of images into the region’s coastal bedrock. Animals, faces, peoples, and shapes are among more than 1,500 recorded images. Petroglyphs tell us many things. They show the animals people harvested, the tools they used, and even the jewelry they wore. They also reveal spiritual beliefs. Creatures with both human and animal characteristics remind viewers of the humanness inside every being. Kodiak’s petroglyphs are a rare record of the Alutiiq world and may be up to a thousand years old.

Although these images are carved in stone, they can be fragile. Natural forces continually shape Kodiak’s coast and impact the preservation of rock art. Wind and waves gradually wear away the images as daily tides cover and uncover the artwork. In some places, the surrounding rock is fragile and disintegrating from weathering. In others, algae, barnacles, and mussels grow around the artwork, covering the pictures and damaging their surfaces.

If you encounter a petroglyph site, treat the carvings with care. First, remember the images are the work of an Alutiiq ancestor and were likely created as part of a ritual. Petroglyphs are spiritually important to Alutiiq people. Second, you are a visitor and the images belong to the owner of the land on which they occur.

Enjoy looking at petroglyphs, but don’t walk on them; don’t enhance the carvings with chalk, paint, or anything else; don’t scrape away marine creatures; and don’t make rubbings. All these activities can damage rock art. Instead, enjoy the rock art in non-destructive ways and record what you see. Make drawings of the artwork, take photographs, or create a video showing the petroglyphs and describing what you see. And remember to share your finds with the Alutiiq Museum.

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Cape Alitak petroglyph showing a face held between two whales. Drawing by Sven Haakanson Jr.
What is Rock Art?
Images created on stationary piece of stone are called rock art. This type of artwork includes pictographs—rock paintings, petroglyphs—rock carvings, and intaglios—images cut into the ground.

What types of rock art did Alutiiq people make?
Pictographs are more common in Cook Inlet and Prince William Sound, while petroglyphs are more common in the Kodiak region. Kodiak has two very different types of petroglyphs. Some boulders have images of people, animals, and tools. These petroglyphs tend to occur along the shoreline. Other boulders have circular pits and incised lines. These petroglyphs tend to occur on the banks of salmon streams.

Why did Alutiiq people make rock art?
Rock art is often associated with spiritual life. The imagery and location of Kodiak’s petroglyphs suggest that they were tied to harvest rituals and perhaps the use of particular harvesting areas by generations of family members.

Learn more

Photograph and drawing of petroglyph panel with faces and shapes from Cape Alitak, site XTI-129, AM454. Photograph and drawing by Sven Haakanson Jr.

BY THE NUMBERS

- There are 360 rock art sites in Alaska.
- There are 37 rock art sites in the Alutiiq world. Much of this artwork is in the Kodiak region. Here there are 27 known rock art sites with over 1527 images.
- There are 26 petroglyph sites in the Kodiak region and just one known pictograph site. Kodiak’s only pictograph is a large black circle painted on a pale slab of granite.
- Kodiak petroglyph sites have an average of 65 images, but range from 1 to 432 images.
- Kodiak’s petroglyphs are larger than you might imagine. Some are up to 117 cm / 46 inches tall.

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Many Thanks to our Archaeological Site Stewards

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