

Iqallugsurluni Imarmi – OCEAN FISHING



The ocean surrounding Kodiak contains large populations of marine fish. Halibut, cod, and other fish breed and winter in the region's productive, deep waters. As winter storms ease and the weather warms, these fish move into shallow coastal waters to feed. Alutiiq/Sugpiaq fishermen take advantage of this shift to harvest fresh food for their families. Halibut and cod are predictable, delicious sources of spring meals. As in the past, Alutiiq people enjoy marine fish both fresh and dried. Families cut fish into strips and air-dry the meat to eat all year.

Harvesting begins in April and continues through the summer. Today people catch bottom fish with handheld jigs, fishing poles, and commercial gear. In the past, fishermen in skin-covered kayaks used wood and bone fishing rigs baited with clams to lure marine fish. Every rig had a spreader, a wooden bar with a bone hook suspended from each end. At the center of the spreader, fishermen secured a stone weight designed to sink the rig to the ocean floor.

What did Alutiiq fishermen use for line? The thin stems of kelp plants can grow up to one hundred feet long and will stretch dramatically before breaking. Alutiiq craftsmen took advantage of kelp's elasticity to create fishing lines that reached the ocean floor and held struggling fish. When a fish bit a hook, a fisherman pulled it to the surface, killed it with a small wooden club, and tied it to his kayak for the trip home.



Ocean fishing rig. Koniag, Inc. Collection, Karluk One. AM193.

In the historic era, metal hooks and monofilament replaced bone barbs and kelp line. However, the halibut fishing tackle used by anglers today is very similar to the gear Alutiiq ancestors used to pull fish from Kodiak waters.