

Alutiiq Dangle Earrings

INSTRUCTIONS BY LARITA LAKTONEN-WARD



This activity creates one pair of Alutiiq/Sugpiaq dangle earrings using dentalium shells and beads.

MATERIALS

2 Dentalium Shells
Beads (sizes 6 & 8)
2 Earring Headpins
2 Earring Hooks

Note: Dentalium shell can be purchased from Etsy and other online retailers.

EQUIPMENT

Wire cutters
Jewelry pliers - both needle nose and round nose

Kulunguak cucunartuk. — Her earrings are pretty.

STEP 1: BEGIN BEADING

Take an earring headpin and hold it with the flat head on the bottom (to hold your beads in place). Add one or more beads onto the pin. Then add a piece of dentalium shell.

STEP 2: FINISH BEADING

Add one or more beads above the dentalium shell. Experiment with different colors, sizes, and styles of beads to create your own design.

STEP 3: SECURE THE BEADS

Leave about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of space on the top of the headpin. Using round nose jewelry pliers, bend the head pin wire to create a 90-degree loop.

STEP 4: ADD A HOOK

Add an earring hook then bend the wire over to close the loop and secure the hook.

STEP 5: REPEAT

Duplicate the earring to create a pair. Wear and enjoy, or give as a gift.

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ABOUT EARRINGS & DENTALIUM

Earrings (kulunguat) are one of the types of jewelry worn by Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people. Paintings from the early 1800s show Alutiiq people with earrings tied in their ear lobes and around the rims of their ears, with up to eight piercings per ear. These earrings were fashioned from strings of glass trade beads (pinguat). Other common materials included handmade beads of shell, coal, amber, and ivory, and slender dentalium shells.

Dentalium (aimhnaq) is a common name for the long, curved, white shells of scaphopods, a marine mollusk. Alutiiq people obtained these horn-like, hollow shells in trade (cimiulluteng) with the people of Southeast Alaska. They used the shells to decorate clothing, earrings, and nose pins, and they were extremely valuable. A pair of dentalium shells could be traded for an entire squirrel skin parka.

How long have the Alutiiq people worn earrings? For at least 2,500 years according to archaeological finds. The use of beads and other jewelry coincides with a period of population growth, long-distance trade, and increased warfare. It appears that people began wearing jewelry to express their affiliation with social groups. Earrings may have been part of this practice. People wearing earrings are also shown on pebble drawings, small pieces of incised stone about 600 years old. Although the function of these pebbles is unknown, they show people in decorated parkas and headdresses. Some are wearing dangling strings of beads that may be earrings.

Pebble drawings possibly showing people with earrings,
Settlement Point site, Afognak Island,
Afognak Native Corporation Collection, AM33.

