

Imaken Ima'ut *From the Past to the Future:*
Seventy-Five Hundred Years of Kodiak Alutiiq/Sugpiaq History

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Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository
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MiRikaan'saat Americans

By April Isiik Laktonen Counciller

Apaaqayugtaallria, "Atakuu,
My grandpa always said, "In the future,

caqit cimirciqut tamarmeng."
everything will change."

Chorus of *Puukicaat*—Buttons

Lyrics by Phyllis Peterson, Alisha Drabek, and Candace Branson, 2011

Introduction

The American era of Alutiiq/Sugpiaq history began in 1867, when Russia sold its control of Alaska to the United States under the Treaty of Cession (Figure 5.1). This era primarily spans the twentieth century but continues to the present. The early decades of the twenty-first century, when this chapter was written, are part of the American era and the ongoing influence of world culture and politics on Native peoples (Table 5.1). Like the decades of Russian rule, the years of American governance have been marked by continual—sometimes tumultuous—change in Alutiiq *nunat*—communities. Many of the same impacts have been experienced by other Alaska Native groups and more broadly by other Native American people. The experiences of the Kodiak Alutiiq are an example of how American colonialism shaped a Native community, but these forces were not limited to Kodiak.



Figure 5.1. Canceled check in the amount of \$72 million for the purchase of Alaska, issued August 1, 1868. Records of the Accounting Officers of the Department of the Treasury, Record Group 217, National Archives.



Figure 5.18. Hunting camp on the Ayakulik flats with harvested game—otter and fox pelts and reindeer haunches, about 1960. Kodiak History Museum, Sid Omlid Collection, P.846-4A-184.

the fire burning uncontrolled, the herd escaped, and more than twelve hundred animals became feral. Moreover, the fire burned the animal's preferred food, encouraging them to graze elsewhere. Although a few Akhiok families continued small-scale herding into the 1950s and 1960s, the industry never recovered. A small herd survives today, scattered around the Ayakulik River drainage (Figure 5.18).

Bear Hunting

The *taquka'aq*—Kodiak brown bear is one of the largest living land mammals in North America (Figure 5.21). Today, the Kodiak region is home to more than three thousand of these enormous creatures, which have long been a source of food and materials for Alutiiq people. Bears once represented the only large land mammal available to Kodiak hunters, before Sitka deer, elk, and reindeer were introduced in the twentieth century (Box 5.2). In addition to meat and fat, bears provided gut for waterproof clothing, bone for tools, teeth for jewelry, and large hides for bedding. Inside the warmth of *ciqlluat*—sod houses, people sat on

bear hides to sew, make tools, and play games. In the evening, families wrapped themselves in the plush furs for sleeping. Hunters took bears with bone arrows, slate spears, snares, and deadfall traps. Some were killed in their dens. Others were ambushed along habitually used trails.

Bear hunting requires a very detailed understanding of Kodiak's weather, the landscape, and bear behavior. Alutiiq hunters are renowned for spending hours watching a hillside to locate a den, observe an animal's daily habits, or identify a bear trail. Once a hunter knew when and where a particular bear was likely



Figure 5.21. Alvin Amason in his studio with *Big Sum Bich #2*, and oil on canvas and panel painting he completed in 2016. Amason's grandfather was Eli Metrokin, a bear guide from Old Harbor. AM803. Photo by Amy Steffian. Purchased with support from Rasmuson Foundation.

to go, he picked the perfect spot to ambush his prey. Careful observation and patience brought the animal to the hunter, saving a tough slog through the brush and preventing dangerous surprises.

In the early twentieth century, hunters from around the world flocked to Kodiak in search of record-breaking brown bears. Although trophy hunting was not an Alutiiq tradition, Alutiiq men became famous for their guiding expertise. At places like Karluk Lake, Sturgeon River, Deadman Bay, Kiliuda Bay, and Uyak Bay, outfitters established remote bear camps and hired Native guides to lead their clients. Guides typically helped visiting hunters for about two weeks at a time, hiking the hills and spotting for large animals, positioning hunters for kills, and even telling them when to shoot. Guides were also responsible for butchering bears and packing the hides and skulls back to camp (Figure 5.22). Many Alutiiq guides worked in the spring and the fall, on either side of the salmon fishing season. This allowed them to fish commercially and harvest food for their families.

“Bears were like cattle around Karluk Lake. . . looking in your glasses about four o’clock in the afternoon and you see a splash here, splash there, splash here, splash there, the bears are fishing in the water all as far as you could see.”

Eli Metrokin, Alutiiq bear hunting guide.
From Dodge 2004:249.

Guiding was a regular source of income for Alutiiq men from the 1930s through the 1960s. However, running your own outfit and making the best money required a registered guide license. Although some Alutiiq men obtained this certification, the paperwork and written

test were barriers to others. Thus, although Alutiiq guides were essential to the success of hunts and often taught their employers bear hunting skills, they were not recognized as professionals. Alutiiq participation in guided bear hunting has waned since the 1970s with the implementation of stricter sport hunting and guiding regulations. Today, most bear guides are not Alutiiq.

Ironically, although Alutiiq people had harvested brown bears for food for thousands of years, laws enacted in the 1920s limited the subsistence harvest. People in remote areas quietly continued to hunt bears. Elders recall eating bear meat similar to the way people eat deer meat today. It was common when they were children. However, because bear hunting was hidden, the State of Alaska determined that subsistence hunting of bears was no longer practiced and banned the activity in 1987. Despite a large and stable population of animals, the Alutiiq were not allowed a traditional harvest. It took ten years and federal hearings, but in 1997, Alutiiq hunters were again permitted to harvest bears for food based on their long history of use. However, only a handful of animals can be taken by subsistence hunters each year across the entire archipelago.



Figure 5.22. Bear guide Larry Maffay with client Jake Ara and a ten-foot bear hide, 1963. Violet Abel Collection, AM507. Gift of the City of Old Harbor.

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Cover Photo: Seiners in Kodiak's Saint Paul Harbor, January 2024, photo by Patrick Saltonstall.
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This book is accompanied by a lesson plan for use in high school classrooms. Please visit the publication page of the Alutiiq Museum's website to download a free copy—alutiiqmuseum.org.