

# *Nuna Pillria* – NATURAL DISASTERS



People who live in northern environments prepare for winter. They know that the change in seasons brings cold, darkness, and stormy weather, limiting access to resources. To avoid hardships, families stockpile food, repair and insulate their houses, and pull their boats from the water. But it is not always possible to plan for difficult times. In addition to the rhythm of the seasons, Alutiiq/Sugpiaq communities experienced devastating, unpredictable natural disasters. The Alutiiq homeland lies in a seismically active region. Here the Earth's tectonic plates continually collide, causing earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Small events have little effect on Kodiak residents. Large events can be catastrophic.

## **VOLCANIC ERUPTIONS**

Dig into Kodiak's soil and you will find layers of volcanic ash. There are no volcanoes in the archipelago, but for thousands of years, winds have carried ash to Kodiak from the volcanoes on the Alaska Peninsula. On June 6, 1912, Mt. Novarupta exploded. It was the largest volcanic eruption in the 20th century, directly opposite Kodiak Island. For three days, the skies over northern Kodiak were black, and over a foot of ash fell like snow. The ash brought toxic fumes, collapsed buildings, disrupted communications, polluted drinking water, and killed plants, animals, and fish.

## **EARTHQUAKES**

On Good Friday, March 27, 1964, as Kodiak residents prepared for Easter, a giant section of the Earth's crust slipped. Far beneath the ocean between Kodiak Island and Prince William Sound, the movement caused a series of tsunamis (tidal waves). Giant waves slammed into the eastern coast of the archipelago, flooding and washing away villages and destroying natural resources. People drowned, boats were lost, and entire communities had to relocate. The earthquake had a magnitude of 9.2. Geologists believe that earthquakes of this magnitude occur about once every 500 years, or at least 15 times since people first settled Kodiak.

How did Alutiiq people manage natural disasters? Social ties were essential. History tells us that people often dispersed to neighboring communities or regions, joining family members and friends. People also recorded rare events in stories and drawings, passing valuable information to the next generation—like the importance of storing fresh water, turning your boat upside down so it won't fill with ash, or covering your mouth with wet moss to avoid inhaling ash.

*Shed in an Afognak village pond as  
a result of the 1964 tsunamis.  
Photo by Patrick Saltonstall.*



## **LEARN MORE:**

*Witness, Firsthand Accounts of the Largest Eruption in the Twentieth Century*, 2004, by Jeanne Schaaf. National Park Service, Anchorage. (<http://www.nps.gov/katm/historyculture/upload/Witnessweb.pdf>)