



Umyagait Alarngaut – STEREOTYPES (THEIR MINDS ARE MISTAKEN)

Visitors to Alaska often arrive with mistaken ideas about Native culture and history. Some of the confusion comes from stereotypes about Alaska. Other times, people are not familiar with local history, and need help understanding how the state's cultures have interacted or changed. Here are a few common questions, along with our answers.

Where are the igloos and totem poles?

Alaska is an enormous, culturally diverse state. Many different cultures live here, each with its own unique traditions expertly adapted to local environments. Igloos and totem poles, while common on picture postcards, are only found in certain parts of the state, among certain cultures. The snow house, or igloo, is a temporary shelter built by travelers in northern Alaska and Canada. On rainy Kodiak, islanders built their traditional houses out of wood and sod, creating warm, wind- and waterproof homes.

Totem poles are found in the cultures of Southeast Alaska and British Columbia. The Lingít, Haida, and other coastal peoples carve these dramatic works from large trees growing in their forested homelands. Some are house posts. Others are grave markers. Kodiak's Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people are expert carvers too, but until recently, there were few trees on the island. They fashioned ceremonial masks, dolls, and much more from driftwood.

Who introduced civilization to Alaska?

There is a common misconception that traders brought civilization to Alaska. While it is true that Russian seafarers introduced elements of Western life (firearms, churches, influenza), there were large, prosperous Native societies living in the region. Each of these societies had a unique way of life, with sophisticated political, economic,

educational, and religious systems. Native people brought human civilization to Alaska when they arrived over 13,000 years ago.

How can a person be Native if they hunt with a rifle?

Visitors sometimes think there are no more Native people. They don't see men paddling kayaks and hunting with harpoons, or women wearing bird-skin parkas. They assume that true Native people would live as their ancestors did. They ask, "How can a person be Native if they drive a pick up truck, hunt with a rifle, or wear polar fleece?"

All cultures change. Alutiiq people have lived on Kodiak for over 7,800 years, and their way of life has changed dramatically. Even before the arrival of Europeans, the Alutiiq invented and adopted new technologies, like fishing nets and ulu knives. All people use the best technologies available to them, but they do so in ways that reflect their values and traditions. Alutiiq hunters may carry rifles today, but they hunt with a knowledge of animal behavior and the natural environment passed through generations.

Ap'skikut—Ask Us

Do you have a question about Alutiiq culture or Kodiak history? Ask us online.

<https://alutiiqmuseum.org/cultural-questions-portal/>

LEARN MORE:

Do Alaska Native People Get Free Medical Care? And other frequently asked questions about Alaska Native issues and cultures, 2008, University of Alaska Anchorage & Alaska Pacific University, Anchorage, AK. [Available online as a free download].