

Taquka'asinaq – THE GREAT BEAR



Ivory pin with a bear carving, Three Saints site, Kodiak Island.

The brown or grizzly bear is the largest land mammal in North America. The Kodiak Archipelago is home to more than 3,000 of these enormous creatures, which have long been a source of food and materials for Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people. Bears were once the only large land mammal available to Kodiak hunters until deer, elk, mountain goats, and reindeer were introduced in the 20th century. In addition to meat and fat, bears provided gut for waterproof clothing, sinew for thread, hair for decorating clothing, bone for tools, teeth for jewelry, and hides for bedding. Inside the warmth of a sod house, people sat on bear hides to sew, make tools, and play games. And in the evening, families wrapped themselves in the plush fur for sleeping.

In classical Alutiiq society, people hunted bears in winter and spring, but not during the salmon season, when their meat tasted strongly of fish. Before the introduction of firearms, Alutiiq hunters harvested bears with bows and arrows, slate spears, snares, and deadfall traps. Some were killed in their dens. Others were taken with traps placed in streams, or ambushed along habitually used trails.

The Aliaskans [people of the Alaska Peninsula], like the Koniagas [people of Kodiak Island], always send their best hunter alone against bears. He takes the bow and just two stone-tipped arrows ...

G. Davydov, Russian naval officer, 1802-03

Bear hunting required great caution. Men cleansed themselves in a steam bath before the hunt, wore clean clothes to hide their smell, and never bragged about their kills. A bear might be listening!

In the early 20th century, hunters from around the world flocked to Kodiak in search of trophy brown bears, and Alutiiq men became famous for their expertise as guides. In the 1940s, however, much of the Kodiak Island became a National Wildlife Refuge, and bear hunting was seriously restricted. Some of these restrictions were lifted in recent years, allowing Alutiiq people to hunt bear for subsistence purposes once again.

LEARN MORE:

Kodiak Island and its Bears, 2004, by Henry Dodge. Great Northwest Publishing, Anchorage.

The History of Bears on the Kodiak Archipelago, 2003, by Larry Van Daele, Alaska Natural History Association, Anchorage.