

Arwarsucipet – WHALING TRADITIONS



The Gulf of Alaska lies on the migratory path of the Pacific Ocean's great baleen whales. Blue, fin, sei, humpback, and gray whales swim by Kodiak each year on their way to and from feeding grounds in the Bering Sea. These annual spring and fall migrations brought some species within reach of Alutiiq/Sugpiaq kayaks. Although challenging to harvest, they were an important subsistence resource. Even a small animal could feed a community for weeks. Whales also provided bone for tools, baleen for baskets, sinew for thread and cordage, and flexible membranes for clothing.

Historic accounts reveal that whalers were a select group of powerful people. Hunting was done from kayaks by men armed with slate lances dipped in a potent nerve poison. Hunters focused on the animals passing closest to shore, particularly those that stopped to rest and feed in coastal fjords. Gray whale cows with their newborn calves, humpbacks, and fin whales were among those targeted, particularly the smaller, more easily killed animals. Once speared, the animals were left to die and wash ashore, a process that took several days. Dead whales were given a drink of fresh water and then butchered on the beach. People anointed themselves with fat and blood to honor the animal and show their gratitude for its sacrifice. This ensured future whaling success.



A WHALING SONG

*After I have killed you, do you want to see me dance?
I would not feel bad if the whale dived with me!
I would not let the whale dive with me!
After I have killed the whale, he will feel fine with all
the people around here!*

Sung by Prince William Sound hunters after spearing a whale.
From the *Chugach Eskimo*, by Kaj Brisket-Smith, 1953:35.

Whale petroglyph from Cape Alitak, Kodiak Island.

LEARN MORE:

Koniag Eskimo Poisoned-Dart Whaling, 1994, by Aron Crowell. In, *Anthropology of the North Pacific Rim*, edited by W.W. Fitzhugh and V. Chaussonnet. Pp. 217-242. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C.

Prehistoric Use of Cetacean Species in the Northern Gulf of Alaska, 1994, by Linda Yarborough. In, *Hunting the Largest Animals*, edited by Allen P. McCartney, Pp. 63-81. Canadian Circumpolar Institute, Edmonton.