



## Connected to the Land: The Alutiiq of the Outer Kenai Coast

Kenai Fjords is a place of great change. From the glaciers to the seasons, and from seismic activity to weather and plants or other living things, nothing here stays the same.

The Alutiiq (Sugpiaq) Native people survived here for centuries by following the natural rhythms of Kenai Fjords. They were tuned in to the ongoing changes of this place they called home. Through an acute awareness, they were able to adapt and survive for centuries in a place that later people would dismiss as rugged and inhospitable.

Indeed, some of these extremes would turn out to be their very key to survival. Although Kenai Fjords is not a place where domestication of plants and animals would be widespread, the cycles of nature would lay out an abundant table for its inhabitants. This bounty did not come without great effort, however, and it was available only to those willing to work in concert with others.

### Sparsely Settled

Research indicates the Prince William Sound and outer Kenai coast areas in 1800 were not as densely populated as Kodiak Island. Russians and explorers from Britain and Spain estimated a population of 600 people in the early days of contact (Crowell 2006:4). Yet 37 archeological sites have been identified within Kenai Fjords National Park (Crowell 2006:6) and it is estimated there were five villages on the outer Kenai coast at the time of contact (Crowell 2006:6).

Although archeological evidence from Kodiak Island suggests human occupation dating back more than 6,000 years, the Kenai Fjords sites don't offer similar proof. Studies by archeologist Dr. Aron Crowell indicate village occupation in Aialik Bay dating back to 950 (Crowell 2006:2) and human habitation in McCarty Fjord as early as 250 (Crowell & Mann 1998:60). According to Crowell, this absence of older sites on the outer Kenai coast is "the result of the geological factors and almost certainly does not reflect a late date of first occupation" (Crowell & Mann 1998:67).



"Alutiiq" is a contemporary term describing the indigenous people of the area stretching from Chignik Lagoon on the Alaska Peninsula up to the outer Kenai coast and extending to Prince William Sound. It stems from "Aleut," used by Russians encountering coastal Alaskans in the 1740s.

Maybe with better communication, Russians would have realized that folks in this area called themselves "Sugpiaq" or "real people." Sugpiaq included Chugachmiut in Prince William Sound and Lower Cook Inlet, and Koniag on Kodiak Island and the Alaska Peninsula. Unegkurmiut, meaning "people out that way," was a specific reference to people of the outer Kenai coast (DeLaguna 1956:34).

Many factors contribute to the difficulty of pinpointing when the area was first settled. Glaciers and earthquakes have long played a role in Kenai Fjords' history. Advancing glaciers during the Little Ice Age undoubtedly erased archeological evidence. Other sites disappeared in the coastal subsidence following massive earthquakes known to occur in this seismically active region. Shorelines sank two meters in Aialik Bay (Crowell 2006:5) during the 9.2 magnitude earthquake in 1964 and a similar amount in an even greater magnitude quake in 1170 (Crowell & Mann 1998:50).

### Adapting to Survive

Mobility was a keystone to the Alutiiq way of life. They used kayaks to do their hunting, fishing, and gathering chores in the marine environment. The larger anyaq boat allowed village residents to pick up and move to different sites throughout the seasons. Nothing was done haphazardly. By the time the salmon runs began in the summer, the villagers had relocated to fish camps at the stream mouths. Reflecting the seasonal nature of a fish camp, these sites were movable as were other short-term camps such as those used for egg collecting and seal hunting (Crowell & Mann 1998:69). The larger sites with multiple house pits occurred in areas of larger resource diversity where people stayed for greater lengths of time due to the expanded availability of food and other resources (Crowell & Mann 1998:155).



Sea travel.

There was a great cooperative effort in the spring through autumn months as people prepared sufficient food stores to get them through the winter when fish were not readily available (Crowell & Mann 1998:153). Storms and snow restricted travel during the winter and more time was spent inside.

During the Little Ice Age (approx. 1100-1800 AD), glaciers in Kenai Fjords extended far beyond their present-day termini. Native people moved from a Harris Bay village site in the early- to mid-1700s when a tidewater glacier got too close, its calving ice stirring the waters and sometimes blocking travel (Crowell & Mann 1998:115). Lives of the Alutiiq in an Aialik Bay settlement were disrupted by two different geologic events: An earthquake in 1170 caused people to leave their homes and the village was subsequently resettled, but a volcanic eruption (circa 1277-1401) caused the people to leave once again (Crowell 2006:6).

People of the outer Kenai coast adapted to all sorts of changes, including the arrival of Russians with their outposts at Alexandrovsky (English Bay and later Nanwalek) in 1786 and Voskresenskii (Seward) in 1793. Unlike other areas where Russian traders took hostages and forced Alaska Natives to hunt for sea otters, it is thought that hunters of the outer Kenai coast received tobacco, beads, and other trade goods for their furs. The people from Aialik Bay did not have problems with food shortages like those indicated by archeological sites of the Koniag on Kodiak Island during this period (Crowell 2006:43).

The establishment of the Russian Orthodox mission in Kenai in 1844 caused some Alutiiq people to leave the outer Kenai coast for Lower Cook Inlet (Cook & Norris 1998:60). The cash economy of fish canneries in Nanwalek in the late 1800s also offered a reliable way to earn a living and more families left the outer coast. Beginning with the 1890 Census, there was no further indication of Alutiiq villages on the outer Kenai coast but many Alutiiq people still used the area for subsistence. Subsistence in this area still continues to this day.

Mary Forgal of Alutiiq-Russian ancestry was married to Frank Lowell who had come to Alaska from Maine and become a trader for the Alaska Commercial Company. It is believed the 1883 volcanic eruption of Mount Augustine in Cook Inlet and ensuing tidal waves were the reasons the Lowell family left Alexandrovsky in 1884 and moved to the head of Resurrection Bay (Brue 2006:7). Two decades later, Mary Lowell would sell her homestead to the man who created the town of Seward and started construction of Alaska Central Railway.



Cleaning fish.



### Archeological Digs Help Tell the Story

In 2001, a project designed to link studies in archeology, oral history, and environment began in order to gain a greater understanding of the past and how it relates to the present. People from the communities of Nanwalek, Port Graham, and Seldovia who are descendants of the outer Kenai coast peoples have joined with the National Park Service and the Smithsonian's Arctic Studies Center to conduct a series of archeological digs in Kenai Fjords National Park. Through their oral history and observations, Alutiiq descendants are helping interpret artifacts from these historic sites. Their participation also follows a desire for connection with their history.

Looking at animal bones found in middens, researchers can track how changing temperatures and glacial conditions affected the local food supply and, in turn, how that correlated to human settlement patterns. Scientists believe areas of high resource diversity had more continuous settlement because key resources were available no matter what part of the climate cycle they were in (Crowell 2006:68).



“During cold phases, salmon decline but forage fish such as herring and capelin increase, supporting larger populations of seals, sea lions, and other predators,” wrote Dr. Crowell in 2006 when explaining an archeological survey planned for Nuka Bay. These areas with colder waters would attract hunters. Bones found in the middens indicate larger marine mammals during the Little Ice Age.

The subsistence way of life is oftentimes described as being in complete harmony with nature, but some see it simply as another form of economics. Either way you look at it, subsistence doesn't just apply to food; it also entails acquiring materials needed for clothing, shelter, transportation, medicine, and tools (Crowell & Mann 1998:A13). In a cash economy, compensation for labor helps an individual obtain the items necessary for life. In a subsistence economy, an individual's daily tasks are geared to this acquisition of necessities. There are few times when they are “off the clock.”

Sifting through the items recovered in the archeological digs, Crowell is able to determine when each particular site was occupied—whether it was prior to Russian contact or shortly after contact. As the Alutiiq people increased their level of trade with the Russians, more copper and iron tools, beads, and china would show up, and less stone tools would be found.

### Native Lands within the Park

Descendants of the outer coast Alutiiq people continued to return to the Kenai Fjords in the decades following their move to Lower Cook Inlet. Men would often use their outer coast subsistence camps from October through April, and return to Port Graham and Nanwalek for summer jobs in the fish canneries (Crowell 2006: 66, 68). This subsistence

activity tapered off in the 1930s-40s and was almost non-existent by the time Kenai Fjords National Park was created in 1980.

During the land selection process of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, both Port Graham Corporation and English Bay Native Corporation chose ancestral lands that fell within the boundaries of Kenai Fjords National Park. English Bay Native Corporation eventually sold its 32,000 acres to the park, while Port Graham retains ownership of more than 42,000 acres within park boundaries.

English Bay did retain rights to cultural resources of the lands sold to the National Park Service.



Elders visit a 200 year-old site in the park.