

Southwest Alaska The Sea, A Common Bond

In this section you will learn about:

The common bond of Southwest Alaska Natives
How the Aleuts used the sea's resources
How the Koniag Eskimos used the sea's resources
How the Yupik Eskimos used the sea's resources

Three Native groups share one bond

Today only six of the over 200 islands in the Aleutian chain have year round villages. Before the Russians came to trade in the 1700s, every major island with fresh water was inhabited.

Most anthropologists believe that early Aleutian Island inhabitants came from Beringia 10,000 or more years ago across the land bridge that now is covered by the Bering Sea. Others think the Aleutian Islands were a crossroads and their people came from east and west as well as north. The people who stayed have come to be known as Aleuts. Over time the diverse groups with their distinct languages and customs blended and created a common heritage.

The Aleut heritage is much different from the background of their neighbors to the east and north. The Koniag Eskimos of Kodiak Island and the Yupik Eskimos of riverine Southwest Alaska are closely related to each other. On Kodiak Island traces of a culture called the Kachemak, which began more than 6,000 years ago, have been found. About a thousand years ago Eskimos moved onto the Alaska Peninsula and then crossed the straits to Kodiak Island where they displaced people of the Kachemak tradition.

The three Native cultures of Southwest Alaska the Aleuts, the Koniag Eskimos, and the Yupik Eskimos shared one bond. They used the sea to fill nearly all of their needs.

Aleuts depend upon the riches of the sea

The rough, mountainous Aleutian Islands could not support human life. Only a few needs, such as stones for knives or lamps and grass for woven baskets, were met from the land. For everything else, the people turned to the sea.

Most Aleuts located their villages on the northern shores of the islands fronting on the Bering Sea. Usually the people settled on points of land between two bays or on narrow sandspits. Villagers were fiercely possessive of their

hunting and fishing sites.

Seals were particularly important to the Aleuts. The Aleuts ate seal meat and burned seal fat in stone lamps which heated and lighted their homes. The inhabitants used seal intestines to make waterproof clothing and used bristles of the seal's beard for ornaments.

The sea also provided many kinds of shellfish and seaweed. Besides collecting sea urchins, the Aleuts gathered mussels, whelks, and clams. They hunted sea mammals, including whales.

To gather food and to travel the Aleuts became adept seafarers. They traveled in skin covered boats, kayaks to hunt. Families traveled in large open skin covered boats, umiaks, to visit other islands. Some Aleuts traveled as far as the Gulf of Alaska in these boats to trade.

Life is easier for the Koniag Eskimos

Life was easier for the Koniag Eskimos of Kodiak Island than for the Aleuts. The Koniags could hunt and trap in the timbered hills of their territory. They also could fish for salmon. Because of the warm Japanese Current, waters off Kodiak and the surrounding islands were usually ice free.

Yupik villagers stay close to home

Yupik villagers lived along the channels and deltas of the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers. Their legends say these rivers were carved by the talons of the great raven. The Yupik moved seasonally between summer fishing camps, fall hunting camps, spring trapping camps, and permanent winter homes.

In summer the Yupik used kayaks and umiaks. For much of the year, however, the rivers and lakes of the delta country were frozen. In winter they used flat bed sleds constructed from driftwood and fitted with ivory or baleen runners. These sleds, were pulled by hand. Wood or ivory ice creepers and a pointed staff helped the Natives keep their footing. Snowshoes of wood and rawhide were also used.

Salmon were central to the Yupik diet. The fish were caught with gill nets set from a kayak or with funnel shaped fish traps that could also be used under the ice in winter. The Yupik also fished from the riverbanks or from their kayaks, using short rods and sinew lines.

Summary questions

What common bond was shared by the Aleuts, Koniag Eskimos, and Yupik Eskimos?

What did the Aleuts use seals for?

Why was life easier for the Koniag Eskimos than for the Aleuts?

What food was most important to the Yupik Eskimos?

Inquiry question

Find out about the Japanese Current. Make a map that shows where it goes.

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