

Stream Side Settlement of the Karluk River Kodiak Island, Alaska



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Along the Karluk

The Karluk is one of the most productive salmon systems in the Kodiak region. Alutiiq people have been using the lake and river for more than 6,000 years. Archaeological survey data indicate that the region's population grew and that settlement locations shifted over time focusing on different salmonid resources as harvesting strategies changed and intensified. By the late prehistoric era, there were seven major villages in the region. To better understand Alutiiq uses of inland environments, the Alutiiq Museum and Koniag, Inc. have partnered on a long-term research program. The team is studying the seasonality and duration of settlement. Research began in 2019 at KAR-310, a multi-component site at Karluk Lake outlet. Excavation focused on a late prehistoric house depression and an adjacent midden mound.

Nanwam Caniani Nunasinalleq Big Old Village by the Lake

KAR-310 lies on the south bank of the Karluk river, in an area with relatively shallow water that holds the remains of numerous stone fish weirs. Here, cultural deposits stretch more than 250 meters, flanking both the river shore and the outlet. On the site's surface there are 16 multi-room house depressions typical of the late prehistoric era, as well as five midden-mounds, and at least 8 small depressions. These depressions may represent outbuildings or dwellings from an older occupation.

Site deposits are over a meter deep with multiple layers. A 2011 test uncovered evidence of at least four occupations spanning several thousand years. Importantly, some of the deposits contain well-preserved animal bones, hair, fur, and even wood.

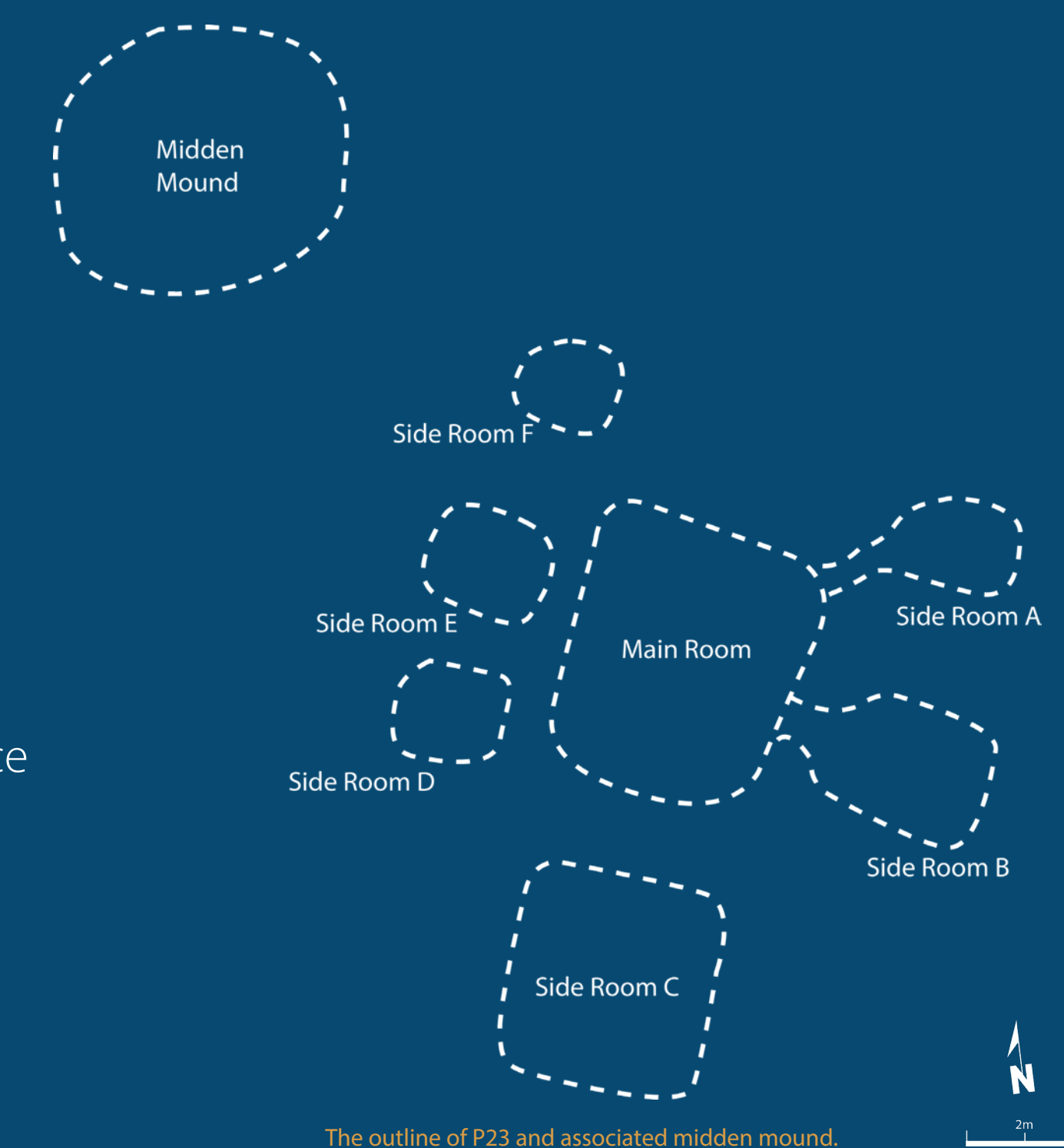
Midden

The midden mound contained over 110 cm of cultural deposits with large quantities of fire cracked rock, charcoal, wood ash, and preserved animal bone and shell. Analysis of the animal remains is underway at Boston University. However, field observations indicate the presence of both riverine and marine species. The diversity of marine animal remains suggests an enduring connection with the nearby coast.

- Salmonids—in a variety of sizes
- Marine fish
- Marine mammals—including porpoise
- Birds—including large birds
- Shellfish—butter clams, blue mussels, chitons, sea urchins, and whelk

House

Alutiiq Museum archaeologists excavated in P23, a semi-subterranean structure with a large central room and six side rooms connected by short passageways. The investigation confirmed a typical late prehistoric Alutiiq house with sod walls, a thatched roof, and a central stone hearth. The side room contained large amounts of fire cracked rock, charcoal, and fish bones—this room was likely used for processing and smoking fish. Like many Alutiiq homes, the floor held evidence of several use and re-flooring episodes, and one significant remodel.



Artifacts

Archaeologists recovered 327 artifacts from the site. Ground slate ulus are the most common tool (50% of tools) and likely reflect salmon butchering. Evidence of hunting, tool manufacture, and social life is also present. Notable finds include a small bone fishhook, ground slate points, an ivory lip plug, and four pebbles with unique incised lines. Several temporally sensitive artifacts hint at a very late prehistoric occupation ca. 300 years before present.

The materials used in artifact manufacture are largely local—procured in the surrounding region. However, a few pieces were made from stone found on the eastern shore of Kodiak or the Alaskan mainland. Like the animal remains, the artifacts illustrate that residents were connected to regions beyond the river.

Summary

Excavations at KAR-310 provide a detailed look at settlement in the Karluk drainage about 300 years ago. Research revealed a substantial settlement where Alutiiq ancestors focused heavily on salmon harvesting and processing. However, it also illustrated that people were harvesting and using a variety of resources available from the coast. We suspect this settlement was used most heavily during the late summer and fall when salmon resources were most abundant in the area, and perhaps into early winter. Karluk Lake was clearly a desirable locale where families returned year after year, reusing houses and rebuilding when necessary.

