

Aaquyaq & Arhnaq – RIVER OTTER & SEA OTTER



Kodiak is home to two varieties of otter, the *arhnaq* or sea otter (Latin: *Enhydra lutris*), that inhabits coastal waters, and the *aaquyaq* or river otter (Latin: *Lutra canadensis*), that lives primarily in freshwater lakes and streams, but ventures into the ocean to hunt. Alutiiq/Sugpiaq hunters continue to pursue both animals for their plush fur, which they make into clothing. Otter fur was once a preferred material for elaborately decorated ceremonial parkas. Today, people make warm slippers, hats, mittens, and bed covers from otter pelts.

Alutiiq hunters traditionally captured river otters in deadfall traps weighted with large rocks, or with snares made of flexible sticks. In contrast, they hunted sea otters in kayaks, with groups of men working together. Hunters encircled an animal, shooting at it with bone darts each time it surfaced. Air bubbles indicated the otter's movements. When the animal was exhausted, they captured and clubbed it to death to protect its hide from further damage. Hunting magic was an important part of the chase. Hunters tied amulets of eagle down and red ochre inside their kayaks and dressed neatly out of respect for the animal. Freshly killed sea otters were taken to shore, skinned, given a drink water, and their bones buried or returned to the sea. This act released the animal's spirit, ensuring its reincarnation and eventual return to the hunter.

Alutiiq people have many stories about the playful otter. One legend explains that the sea otter was originally a man. While collecting chitons, he was trapped by an incoming tide. To save himself, he wished to become an otter. His transformation created all otters. Another legend explains the otter's use of both sea and land. When the spirits of the land and sea divided the animal, the otter was left behind. At that time he had a short tail. While quarreling over the otter, the spirits tugged on his tail until it stretched. The otter cried, "Please let me go! I will stay with both of you."

LEARN MORE:

A Time to Dance: Life of an Alaska Native 1988, by Mike Rostad and Larry Matfay, A.T. Publishing, Anchorage.

Aaquyat wamtaartut. – RIVER OTTERS ALWAYS PLAY.

Arhnat pugtataarut. – SEA OTTERS FLOAT.



Otter pictographs (rock paintings) from Kachemak Bay, Kenai Peninsula, Alaska.