

Qenatet – SICKNESS



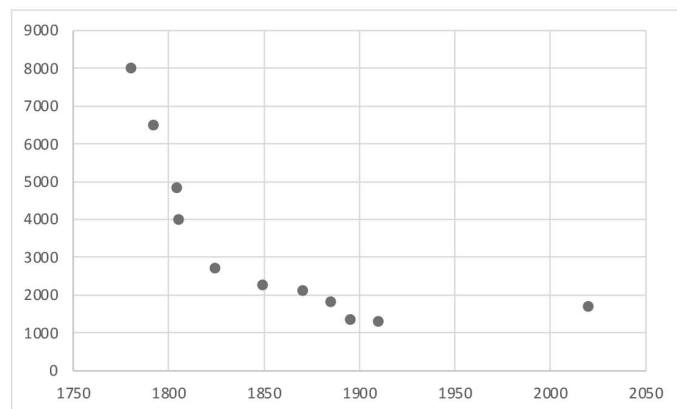
The European explorers who came to the Americas brought much more than foreign tools, customs, and ideas. They brought disease. Before European conquest, many of the epidemic diseases common in crowded Old World communities had yet to reach the New World. The sailors who crossed the Atlantic and Pacific carried smallpox, influenza, cholera, and other illnesses, introducing lethal microorganisms to Indigenous populations with no acquired immunity. The results were devastating.

With every wave of European immigration, disease spread into Native communities. The terrible conditions of colonialism—enslavement, trauma, and malnutrition—enhanced the effects of sickness. Millions of people died. Epidemics were among the most significant forces in the subjugation of Native peoples. The enormous loss of human life led to the abandonment of communities, breakdown of economic and social systems, and loss of cultural traditions. Each epidemic was both a biological and cultural disaster.

By the late 1700s, Old World diseases were ravaging Kodiak Alutiiq/Sugpiaq villages. Historic sources suggest that respiratory diseases, influenza, and smallpox were the leading causes of sickness and death. The 1837 smallpox epidemic was especially deadly. The disease spread from Sitka residents to sailors aboard a ship bound for Kodiak, and then to Alutiiq villages across the Kodiak Archipelago. Russian medics rushed to vaccinate Native people. They reached some villages too late and encountered a fear of vaccination in others. Alutiiq people died. In the following years, the Russians consolidated survivors. What was once sixty-five villages became seven—Woody Island, Eagle Harbor, Three Saints Bay, Aiaktalik, Akhiok, Karluk and Afognak. There are still just seven Alutiiq villages.

Epidemics plagued Alutiiq communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There were outbreaks of typhus (1860), scarlet fever (1865), mumps (1868), measles (1874-1875), a cholera-like illness (1898), influenza (1881, 1899, 1918), and others. Between 1780 and 1910, Kodiak's Native population plummeted from an estimated 8,000 people to just 1,302, an 84 percent loss in 120 years. Today there are about 5,641 Kodiak Alutiiq people living in communities all over the world. Twenty-eight percent live in the Kodiak Archipelago.

Estimated Kodiak Alutiiq Population



Compiled from Clark 1975, Luerhmann 2008, and US Census statistics.

Diseases Introduced by Western Contact: bubonic plague, chickenpox, cholera, diphtheria, influenza, leprosy, malaria, measles, mumps, smallpox, typhus, yellow fever.

LEARN MORE:

Chills and Fever, Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska, 1992, Robert Fortune, University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.