# REPORT

## COMMUNITY ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE ALUTIIQ MUSEUM: AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK SALTONSTALL

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### ABSTRACT

This report is an interview with Patrick Saltonstall, curator of archaeology at the Alutiiq Museum, reflecting on over 30 years of community archaeology in Kodiak, Alaska. The conversation explores the evolution of community-based methods, the importance of trust and flexibility, and practical lessons for future practitioners. Patrick's insights highlight the transformative impact of collaborative archaeology on local heritage, education, and site stewardship.

### INTRODUCTION

Community-based archaeology has become an increasingly important approach in Alaska, fostering collaboration between researchers and local communities. This report draws on an interview with Patrick Saltonstall, in his office at the Alutiiq Museum on May 22, 2025. Patrick's work at the Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak exemplifies the evolution and impact of community-based archaeological practice. The following sections present the interview in a conversational format, followed by a summary of key lessons and methodological adaptations.

### INTERVIEW

**SVEN HAAKANSON:**

**Patrick, you've been working in Kodiak for almost 30 years. How did you get started, and how has your approach changed over time in conducting community archaeology on Kodiak?**

**PATRICK SALTONSTALL:**

**I think a lot of it's been luck. A lot of luck and trust with community. . . . It's also been an evolution. We didn't start where we are now and I think that's very important because if we tried now, we would have gone nowhere.**

**SH:** What were some of the key moments in building trust and relationships with the community?

**PS:** When I started, I was really young, I was in the villages, and I just got to know everybody. When we did archaeology a lot of the people who were involved became important Alutiiq leaders and it grew on itself.

**SH:** Can you talk about how your methods changed as the program grew?

**PS:** We had to be very flexible, I think that's what it comes down to. We had this thing where you had to dig for the entire day, but I always broke that rule so that people could just dig for half a day. We didn't want people to burn out and not like it. On the other hand, we didn't want to become a babysitting program for kids or always just give site tours. We needed to be flexible. We wanted people to give us a substantial amount of time, and yet, have a good time too.

**SH:** How did you manage quality control and data consistency with so many volunteers?

**PS:** I used to do all the screening. We'd only have a few experienced archaeologists doing all the screening

because the volunteers are not archaeologists. They're not trained to recognize what is an artifact and what is not. So, you're standardizing it by having just a few people who can recognize everything do all the screening. That's because if the volunteers miss it digging, they're going to miss it screening, too. I likened myself to an octopus with eight arms. They're doing all the digging and I'm just the head watching and coordinating them all. But with time the volunteers learn how to dig, they get good at it, and then they support it.

**SH:** You've mentioned the importance of storytelling. How did that shape your approach?

**PS:** I think people want the story. They want to be able to say, "Oh, there was a house here, and this is what people did there." They want to know why that site is different from this site because they did something different over here. People want the story—what happened at the sites where we were excavating. The story is more important than just finding arrowheads or flakes of stone that lack context. When I started as a young archaeologist, I worked on digs where I never found out what we discovered. At the end of the summer, I would go back to high school or college without learning the story. It was somewhat unsatisfying. Our volunteers come back and visit the museum, and they get to do lab work, too. They help put the story together, which is a very important aspect of community archaeology.

## DISCUSSION

Patrick's work demonstrates how community archaeology on Kodiak has changed over the past 30 years. Building trust, being flexible, and sharing stories have been key to its success as an ongoing program through the Alutiiq

*Figure 1. Patrick Saltonstall holding net sinkers found on Kodiak Island. Photo by Molly Odell.*

Museum. Local groups like the schools, Coast Guard, landowners, corporations, and tribes have all helped make this museum program successful. The program has inspired young people to learn about their history and science. This work has also inspired community members to protect sites that were once looted and has changed the understanding and attitudes of the entire community about Alutiiq history.

### HOW THE WORK IS DONE THROUGH PATRICK

- All volunteers are welcome.
- Keep flexible schedules.
- People learn by doing, and training them over time helps build their confidence to take on more responsibility.
- Keep things simple, like color-coded buckets, easy notetaking, and teamwork.
- Telling stories is important, and what volunteers talk about what they find helps us build the bigger picture.
- Sharing rides, having extra gear, and making sure everyone is safe.
- Work with local museums or tribes to store and care for the artifacts.
- Share the stories with the public.

## CONCLUSION

The Alutiiq Museum's community archaeology program demonstrates that working collaboratively can build community trust and relationships that inspire interest in history and science. It also helps protect sites because everyone takes pride and ownership in protecting this history. Patrick's philosophy is based on trust, flexibility, and storytelling—and this is good advice for anyone wanting to build lasting and welcoming community archaeology programs in Alaska or anywhere else.


## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## RECOMMENDED READING


Alutiiq Museum

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