

ARTICLE

THE ANCESTRAL ALUTIIQ FOODS PROJECT: CREATING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS ACROSS LONG DISTANCES

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ABSTRACT

Personal and professional relationships cultivated at the local level are an ideal way to build community engagement in archaeology. However, academic archaeology challenges the local nature of relationship building: researchers are often based in locations far from their study area, and local communities may feel historical mistrust or be overwhelmed with requests for short-term collaboration. This paper highlights the value of working with established community-based liaisons and how the collaborative Ancestral Alutiiq Foods Project helps to support connections across thousands of miles.

INTRODUCTION: RELATIONSHIPS FROM A DISTANCE

When I was a junior scholar interviewing for academic jobs, I was asked repeatedly when I would be moving my research program from the Kodiak Archipelago in Alaska to a new location. Would I explore new islands and coastlines? Work on developing ice patch archaeology? Do global, cross-cultural research? These questions made me fear that my academic career could suffer if I did not diversify my research program, but I knew that my research program depended on the relationships I had built with friends and colleagues on Kodiak. I was clear that my research in archaeology should have some contemporary relevance, whether it was for managing natural resources (e.g., West et al. 2020), for use by local communities (e.g., Sholl 2023), or both (e.g., West et al. 2025). I knew that the best way to achieve contemporary relevance was to base the research in the relationships with collaborators, mentors, scholars, students, and community members that had taken years to develop and a commitment to maintain.

As I have reflected on these relationships that formed the foundation of my career, many of them center around the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository

(Fig. 1). This small, tribal museum strives to engage everyone in celebration of Alutiiq culture (Alutiiq Heritage Foundation 2023; Steffian 2006). For decades, the museum's commitment to broad engagement has created a welcoming place for outsiders to participate in research and public outreach by encouraging thoughtful and reciprocal conversations (Steffian and Counciller 2020). As a graduate student and postdoctoral fellow, I craved guidance and knew I would have to gather as many mentors as I could, always asking questions and listening carefully. Together, this dynamic has provided critical scaffolding for my own highly collaborative research program and set the expectations for the ways in which my students, collaborators, and I engage with Alutiiq/Sugpiaq cultural heritage.

Despite the foundational scaffolding provided by this long-term relationship, academic archaeology challenges the local nature of relationship-building: like me, many scholars working in Alaska live far from their study areas (Phillips-Chan and Steffian 2020). While virtual connections are common, distance and accessibility can challenge relationship building and in-person visits



Figure 1. Entrance to the newly renovated Alutiiq Museum, 2025. Photography by Amanda Lancaster, courtesy of the Alutiiq Museum.

(Ritchie et al. 2013). Communities may receive outside researchers with skepticism or be overwhelmed with requests for short-term collaboration (Lauter 2023), and travel to Alaska can be expensive and unpredictable. In this paper, I highlight the value of partnerships facilitated by community research liaisons like the Alutiiq Museum. Community research liaisons and community-based research are increasingly common in the health and climate sciences across the Arctic, and they serve to develop, support, and manage relationships between scientists and communities (e.g., Mercer et al. 2023). However, these positions are not common for archaeological projects. In this paper, I reflect on my own experience in Alaska to examine the value of partnering with a community research liaison that can facilitate and maintain collaborations between archaeologists and local communities, even across thousands of miles. I illustrate this partnership through the Ancestral Alutiiq Foods Project and the lessons learned through this collaborative research program.

While each community and circumstance are different, I suggest three lessons that have broader relevance because they center on relationships: (1) maintaining long-term collaboration, communication, and contact; (2) listening and reshaping goals to accommodate new priorities and expectations; and (3) securing funding and other resources that support the liaison and their community partners.

COMMUNITY RESEARCH LIAISONS: THE ALUTIIQ MUSEUM AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPOSITORY

In different fields and communities across the Arctic, research liaisons are increasingly common. For example, the Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee (IARPC) encourages work with formal community liaisons in its Principles for Conducting Research in the Arctic (IARPC 2018). Ideally, community research liaisons provide a link between communities and researchers by communicating

standards for collaboration, coordinating different ways of knowing, and facilitating relationships (Atalay 2006; Bends et al. 2013; Mercer et al. 2023). As a result, research can be “responsive to local needs and priorities” and has the potential to build lasting change (Jäderholm et al. 2023:1). Formal, salaried positions for community research liaisons exist for projects in the health sciences, climate change observation, and among youth groups in First Nations communities (e.g., Pedersen et al. 2020).

Despite archaeology’s direct relationship to the ancestors and living descendants of Indigenous communities, there exist few formal research liaisons for facilitating complex archaeological research programs. There are many barriers to forming such positions: archaeologists are still learning to make community connections; archaeology research grants are small compared to grants in the medical and physical sciences and may not have adequate funding to support salaried positions; archaeology may not be a tribal priority; or historical mistrust may discourage archaeological research in a community (Atalay 2006; Clifford 2004; Colwell 2016). Even with these potential barriers, there is increasing demand for researchers to engage in formal collaborative methods and establish agreements about research permissions, community participation, and data sovereignty (Desjardins et al. 2022).

Museums are an avenue to supporting this kind of relationship more formally. Many museums engage in research and are deeply committed to community collaboration;¹ however, few actively facilitate archaeological research projects and collaborations. One of these few is the Alutiiq Museum, which now serves as a formal liaison for archaeological research in communities around the Kodiak Archipelago (Alutiiq Heritage Foundation 2023). In 1995, the Kodiak Area Native Association established the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, whose mission is to preserve and share “the heritage and living culture of the Alutiiq people” and to engage people in “the celebration of Alutiiq heritage... [which can] reduce cultural isolation, reawaken cultural traditions, build intergenerational ties that broaden cultural understanding, and create a welcoming environment for discovery” (Alutiiq Museum 2022a:1). Archaeology is an Alutiiq archive or “Alutiiq library” that plays an important role in this mission, and the museum is committed to both sharing and co-creating knowledge with the local community (Alutiiq Museum 2022a; Steffian 2006).

This museum is governed by the Native community, which creates a foundation for service to the Alutiiq people

(Steffian 2006). The museum staff have expertise grounded in deep knowledge about the communities on Kodiak, based on personal experience and their role as prominent and active partners in both community outreach and academic research (e.g., Bends et al. 2013). The Alutiiq Museum draws on this extensive knowledge to represent the cultural interests of their local communities: the museum shares the history of the Alutiiq people, it is a research center, it facilitates transformative and sensitive conversations, and the museum works to bridge the gap between academics and community members (Steffian 2006). It bridges this gap by creating community-centered avenues for sharing research results, such as a newsletter, exhibits, lectures, and publications for a public audience, as well as ways for community members to participate in research in meaningful ways. As local communities revitalize cultural practices, information from the ancestral record becomes increasingly important. Archaeological materials tell the story of how Alutiiq ancestors lived their everyday lives, and the Alutiiq community has a strong interest in the ancestral record, its preservation, and its potential to inform the present (Pullar et al. 2013).

THE ANCESTRAL ALUTIIQ FOODS PROJECT

The Ancestral Alutiiq Foods Project (or Foods Project) arose from my research program and my relationship with the Alutiiq Museum. My research program uses the remains of animals from archaeological sites—the zooarchaeological or archaeological faunal record—to understand how people and animals have interacted over thousands of years in the changing Gulf of Alaska environment (e.g., West et al. 2025). To make this research a reality, I rely on a large collaborative team, including partners from many academic institutions across diverse disciplines, federal and state agencies, undergraduate and graduate students, local Alaska residents, artists, and language experts. The Alutiiq Museum has served as a critical nexus for this research program by facilitating research permissions, fieldwork, public outreach, and new relationships, despite the distance between Boston and Kodiak.

Joffrion and Fernandez (2015) argue that case studies of successful collaboration are the best means of outreach and advocacy. Here, I use the Foods Project as a case study to understand the origins, goals, and outcomes of a successful collaboration. The Foods Project arose from years of partnering with the Alutiiq Museum on archaeological projects, both in the field and in the lab. In the Boston

University Zooarchaeology Lab, my research group and I have worked closely with the Alutiiq Museum to excavate, identify, and analyze faunal material from around the Kodiak Archipelago. This work has focused on understanding which animal species Alutiiq ancestors used, how they were used, and in what season people harvested their food (e.g., Bassett et al. 2019; Bruce 2025; Buckley 2025; Duppenhaller et al. 2018; Foster 2006; Mooneyham et al. 2024; Murphy and West 2025; Quesada et al. 2019; West 2009, 2014; West et al. 2011, 2012, 2016, 2017, 2020; West and France 2015; West and Jarvis 2015; West and Yeshurun 2019). Together with other zooarchaeological studies across the archipelago (e.g., Donta et al. 2016; Etnier 2011; Etnier et al. 2016; Hays 2007; Kopperl 2003; Margaris et al. 2015; Moss et al. 2022; Partlow 2000, 2015, 2021; Partlow and Kopperl 2011), this research chronicles the vast number of animal resources Alutiiq ancestors used, how ancestors moved seasonally, how they processed and stored these resources, and how animal use changed through time.

While these results exist in archaeological reports and academic publications, a piece of their importance lies in their utility to the Alutiiq community. Therefore, this academic record must be brought to life and transformed into an accessible story about ancestral resource use that is based in Alutiiq language, concepts, and tradition. The goal of the Foods Project is to align these goals: we aim to design research in the Boston University Zooarchaeology Lab and our partner institutions that is consistent with the goals of heritage management on Kodiak, and to do this through a partnership with our community liaison, the Alutiiq Museum. Three questions are important for understanding the Foods Project and assessing its products: how did we initiate and sustain our relationship? What is the role of the liaison? And what lessons have been learned over time?

INITIATING AND SUSTAINING RELATIONSHIPS: THE POWER OF LISTENING

Archaeologists Sven Haakanson, Jr., Ben Fitzhugh, and Patrick Saltonstall initiated my relationship with the Alutiiq Museum when I was a new graduate student, and I was in awe of and grateful for every opportunity to go into the field, give a talk, stay at someone's home, have a meal, play bingo, or go for a hike. I tried to express that gratitude by being openly thankful and listening careful-

ly. What was I listening for? I wanted to know why local people were interested in archaeology and how the Alutiiq Museum cultivated and supported that interest: what language and words did the museum and community members use to talk about cultural heritage and archaeology? Who was involved? When and where did they build relationships and discuss cultural heritage? Were outside researchers welcome to participate, and what was working (or not working) in those research projects? Most importantly, I wanted to know how I could tailor my interests and skills as an archaeologist in ways that could support cultural heritage in Kodiak. With this goal in mind, my mentors at the Alutiiq Museum guided me to find ways to maintain my own scholarly interests at the same time I was making that research interesting and relevant to the local community.

One of the ways we have worked together to make that research interesting and relevant is through the Foods Project. My own goals for the Foods Project were formed based on my role as a professor at an academic institution where my responsibilities are to publish academic articles, secure grant funding, and educate undergraduate and graduate students. These responsibilities leave little room for community partnerships but must be adapted to respond to the needs of community collaboration and museum partnerships in archaeology (Henriksen et al. 2022; Hodgetts and Kelvin 2020). From this perspective, the goals of the Foods Project include: (1) to sustain a relationship with the Alutiiq Museum to perform zooarchaeological analyses, when invited, and to make this work relevant to local interests; (2) to contribute the funding and personnel to support the zooarchaeological analyses; (3) to use this opportunity to train students interested in zooarchaeology and Kodiak archaeology; (4) to return the results of these analyses to the museum and the Native corporations in the form of accessible reports and presentations; and (5) to translate the results of this work for public consumption that can contribute to the stories of the past. These results also illustrate the value of archaeological research and historic preservation and the importance of protecting Kodiak's remarkable archaeological record.

This process started when I was a graduate student: by listening carefully, I learned that the Alutiiq Museum was available to facilitate research and share that research. However, the longevity and positivity of our relationship relied on me acknowledging the existing role that the Alutiiq Museum plays in the community (e.g., Jäderholm et al. 2023) and on me being an active and trustworthy

partner (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2006). An active partnership includes the researcher pausing to listen and understand the museum’s mission and their existing programming, exploring how research might benefit the museum and the local community, discussing whether research fits into the museum’s schedule and if they have the personnel to facilitate research, and by considering the financial needs of the museum.

By working with the curator, Amy Steffian, to understand the museum’s goals and financial needs, I secured grant funding to host a small museum exhibit in the Alutiiq Museum gallery. This tiny, single-case exhibit grew into being asked to perform faunal analyses for the museum’s field projects and answering questions of interest to the Native corporations, and eventually to developing and funding public-oriented products that fulfilled the Alutiiq Museum’s mission, connected to local people, and involved the next generation of archaeologists. Two of these projects include the Ancestral Alutiiq Foods Project

poster entitled *Suumacirpet—Our Way of Living* (Alutiiq Museum 2022b; Fig. 2) and *Coloring Iqalluut*, an Alutiiq-language coloring book (Sholl 2023; Fig. 3).

COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS: THE POWER OF THE LIAISON

After years of doing faunal analysis, the Alutiiq Museum invited me to participate in creation of an ancestral foods poster. This poster centers on the concept of *suumacirpet*, which translates to “our way of living” and includes the intricate Alutiiq concept of subsistence (Steffian and Counciller 2012:154). On Kodiak, food comes from the land, air, and water, and harvesting and eating these foods is part of living culture today and has been for more than 7500 years. The Alutiiq Museum had a contract with the Kodiak Island Borough School District Reading English and Alutiiq Development (READ) project to design resources that would support literacy in both English and

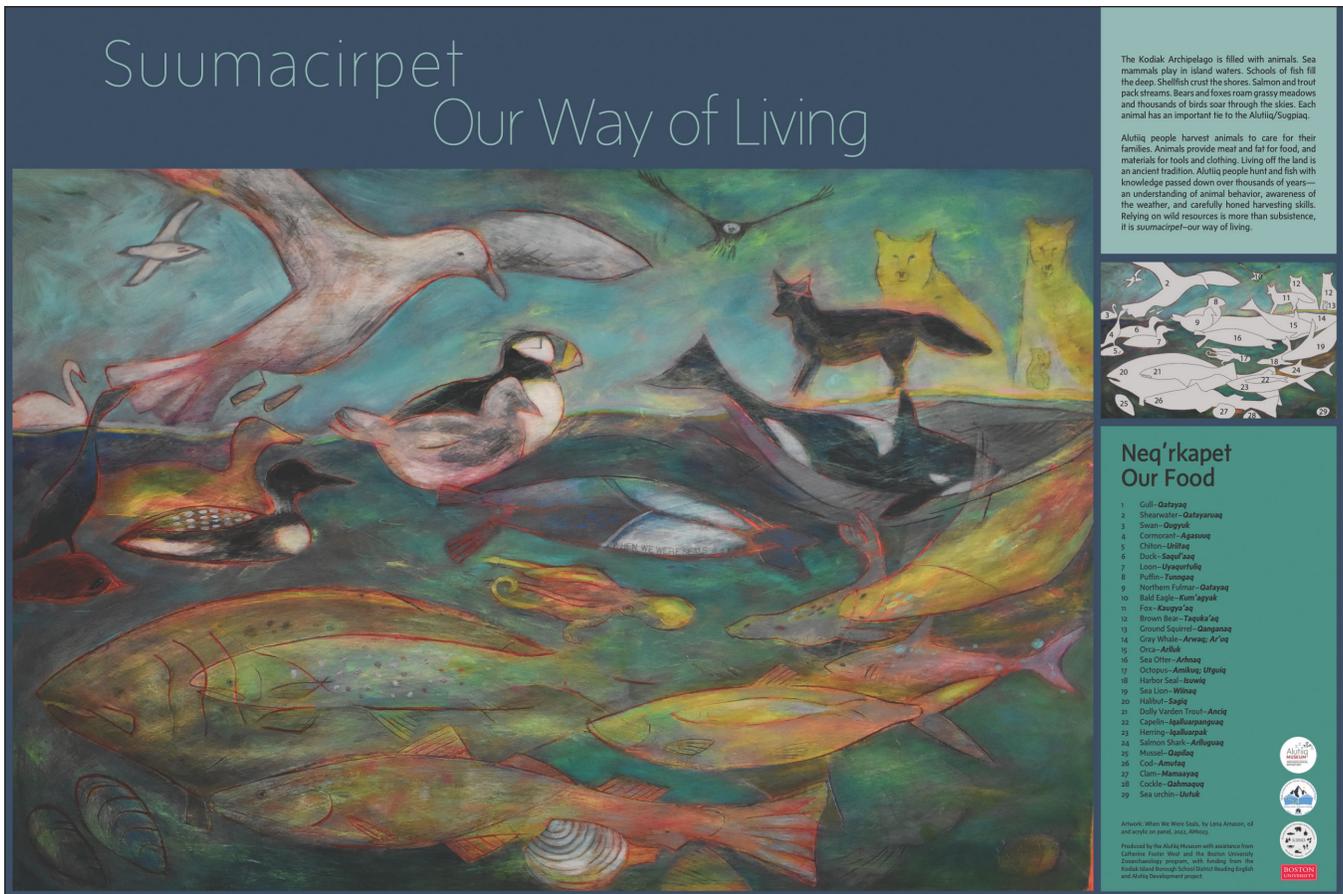


Figure 2. Front of ancestral foods poster, *Suumacirpet—Our Way of Living*, featuring *Once We Were Seals*, a painting by Alutiiq artist Lena Amason, 2022. Produced by the Alutiiq Museum with assistance from Catherine Foster West and the Boston University Zooarchaeology program, with funding from the Kodiak Island Borough School District READ project.

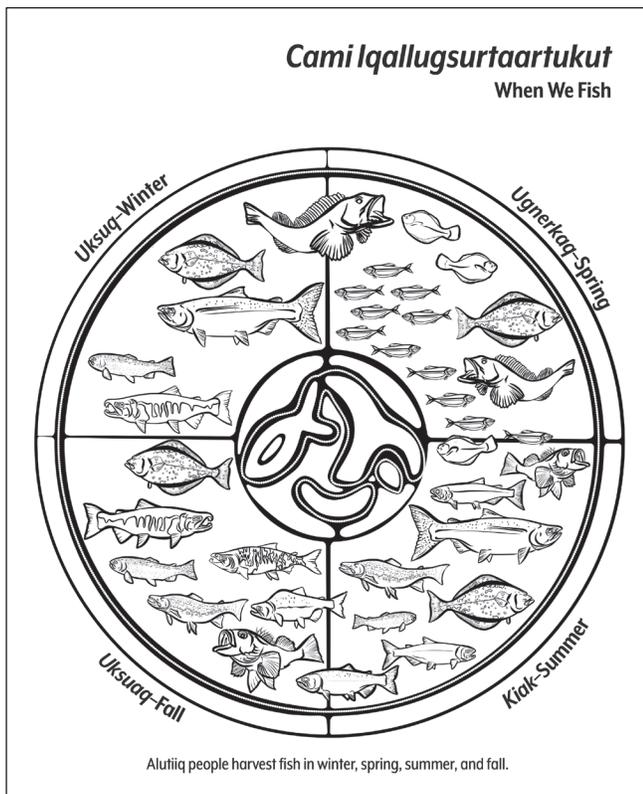


Figure 3. Cami Iqallugsurtaartukut—When We Fish, illustration by Sugpiaq artist Hanna Sholl, 2023, for Coloring Iqallut—Fish. Produced by the Alutiiq Museum with assistance from Catherine Foster West and the Boston University Zooarchaeology program, with funding from the North Pacific Research Board.

Alutiiq. One of these resources was a poster on important Alutiiq animal foods, inspired by a similar poster done in the neighboring Chugach area (Chugach Regional Resources Commission 2022). The museum worked with Elder speakers to review the animal terms so that the poster could be written in both Alutiiq and English, and the poster artwork was created by Alutiiq artist Lena Amason (Alutiiq Museum 2025a). This poster achieved multiple goals: to highlight Alutiiq artistic expression (Steffian 2018), to make Alutiiq language accessible (Chya and Fine 2023), and to document and share the deep and enduring links between Alutiiq people and the animals that have sustained their communities for millennia.

Time was an important component of the poster, which is reflected in the poster’s text: “[l]iving off the land is an ancient tradition. Alutiiq people hunt and fish with knowledge passed down over thousands of years—an understanding of animal behavior, awareness of the weather, and carefully honed harvesting skills. Relying on wild

resources is more than subsistence, it is *suumacirpet*—our way of living” (Alutiiq Museum 2022b). Because the well-preserved Kodiak archaeological record contains a rich record of the animals harvested by Alutiiq ancestors, the Alutiiq Museum asked me to compile an ancestral foods list using the animals have been identified in the zooarchaeological record of the archipelago. I assembled a small team of graduate and undergraduate students to compile sources that included faunal—or animal bone—records from Kodiak. From these sources, we made a list of the common and scientific names of the animals identified.

The poster text highlights marine mammals, schools of marine fish, shellfish, salmon and trout, bears, foxes, and birds, and Lena Amason’s artistry illuminates these animals on the familiar Kodiak landscape (Fig. 2). The complement between past and present is in the details found in the archaeological record, which provided a stunning list of 90 animal species used by Alutiiq ancestors over at least 6000 years. This list illustrates the deep knowledge of the landscape preserved in ancient bones, but also the flexibility and persistence of *suumacirpet* over millennia. Like other Alutiiq Museum publications, the poster encourages viewers to protect the past and honor Alutiiq history by refraining from disturbing archaeological sites or collecting artifacts. This poster was made possible by years of maintaining the relationship between the Boston University Zooarchaeology Lab and the Alutiiq Museum, providing funding and students to assist with the work, and by the Alutiiq Museum acting as a liaison among the artist, local schools, the language experts, and the archaeologists thousands of miles away.

Building on the success of the foods poster, the Boston University Zooarchaeology Lab, in collaboration with scholars at the University of Oklahoma and the University of California, Berkeley, approached the Alutiiq Museum to discuss whether we should apply for funding to create an Alutiiq language coloring book as part of a larger project on fish genomics across the Gulf of Alaska (Kolora et al. 2021). Before we applied for the grant, we approached the museum to see if such a project would be feasible, with the understanding that community engagement must be part of the initial planning process (Pearce et al. 2009). As a community liaison, we met with Alutiiq Museum staff to assess whether a project like a coloring book would fulfill the museum’s mission, whether local people would be interested in a coloring book, and whether Alutiiq language could be incorporated effectively. Not only was the museum enthusiastic about a coloring book that would

complement similar existing products (Sholl 2018), but they were willing to introduce us to an artist, to provide Alutiiq language translation, and to facilitate layout, production, and distribution of the coloring book.

As a research team, we applied to the North Pacific Research Board with three goals in mind: because the ancestral faunal record was central to the larger research project, our first objective was to work with Alaska Native collaborators to contextualize and share the results of this research. Second, we wanted to work as a collaborative team using multiple lines of data, including zooarchaeology, artifacts, and genomics, to inspire the artist's illustrations for the coloring book. And finally, we wanted the coloring book to reach a wide public audience across coastal Alaska and beyond and to serve as a resource for both biological and cultural information that resides with the local Alutiiq community in Kodiak (e.g., Chya and Fine 2023).

Thanks to the Alutiiq Museum acting as a trusted liaison and project coordinator, we met with Alutiiq artist Hanna Agasuuq Sholl (Alutiiq Museum 2025b). Hanna lives in Kodiak, is a long-standing Alutiiq Museum partner, and was eager to create a resource that would appeal to people of a wide age range. The coloring book is called *Coloring Iqalluut* and, like the foods poster, it centers on *suumacirpet* (Fig. 3). The coloring book was created through long-distance Zoom conversations with Hanna, where we discussed our vision and goals and she shared the personal details of her journey to becoming an Alutiiq language speaker, artist, and advocate. As part of the creative process, Hanna asked us to learn and pronounce Alutiiq vocabulary relevant to the book, patiently teaching us unfamiliar sounds that humbled everyone on the team. In *Coloring Iqalluut*, Hanna's artwork tells the story of fishing across the seasons today and in the past. To make this connection through time, Hanna visited the Alutiiq Museum to view fishing-related artifacts, she drew on her own knowledge of the Alutiiq language, and we worked with Alutiiq speaker Dehrich Chya to annotate the coloring book with review by Alutiiq Elders. Hanna's coloring book tells the story of how fishing is deeply rooted in language, the seasons, the land and sea, and it tells an Alutiiq story using words, artwork, fishing, and food.

LESSONS LEARNED: THE POWER OF TIME

The Foods Project has only begun to scratch the surface of what we can learn about Alutiiq and animal relation-

ships from the archaeological record. However, the poster and the coloring book emphasize important themes related to gathering, interpreting, and sharing that history. Throughout my relationship with the Alutiiq Museum and through the process of creating these products, I have learned three central things that have been critical to our success: (1) maintaining long-term communication, contact, and collaboration; (2) listening and reshaping goals to accommodate new priorities; and (3) securing funding that supports the liaison and their community partners.

The first lesson I have learned is that long-term communication, contact, and collaboration (e.g., Cipolla et al. 2019; Lyons and Supernant 2020) have been central to keeping my relationship with the Alutiiq Museum alive and thriving. Relationships often blur the line between professional and personal in a small community, and these friendships have formed the foundation for a strong and respectful working relationship. Building on this personal foundation, I have asked the scholars and students involved in the Ancestral Alutiiq Foods Project to consider the Alutiiq Museum as a critical partner at the beginning of each project by discussing potential research avenues, public outreach efforts, and available resources with the museum staff. I ask my team to listen to and pronounce Alutiiq words, learn Alutiiq culture history, and to participate in person when possible, giving lectures at the Alutiiq Museum, attending smaller conferences in Kodiak, and connecting virtually with the museum, artists, and language experts (e.g. Buckley 2025; Lamb 2024, 2025; Metcalf 2025; Schaal et al. 2024). Given the extensive resources available through the museum's website and publications and the possibility of virtual conversations, these connections have flourished.

Second, I am mindful of the original goals of the museum at its founding (see Steffian 2006) and how these goals may have changed through time. Because the museum serves as a critical liaison and continues to be governed by the Native community, changing goals and priorities are likely to influence archaeological research. I have worried most about the role that a non-Native archaeologist might play in fulfilling the "Alutiiq first" mission of the museum (Steffian 2006:34). Since its founding in 1989 and now with its recent renovation and reopening in 2025 (Fig. 1), the museum has seen multiple directors and boards of directors and new and varied approaches to exhibition, education, and language preservation, and it engages with concerns about the effects of colonization and the power of speaking about decolonization. What has

remained constant are the desire to highlight and share Alutiiq culture and the importance of listening on the part of the researcher.

Third is acknowledging that the community liaison likely has limited resources (Doctors and Carter 2021). The Alutiiq Museum is a small nonprofit organization that relies on the local Native community to help fund the museum. Because the museum staff is so welcoming, researchers may assume the museum can support them with unlimited access to staff time, space in the museum, internet, copies, shipping, and access to museum resources, collections, and archives; however, the museum must fund each of these things itself. By understanding the museum's financial needs and contributing resources, researchers can facilitate collaboration and show respect for the museum's mission and the broader community (Maloney and Hill 2016). The Foods Project is funded by Boston University's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program, Mobius Fund, and Pardee Center, which have supported undergraduate, graduate, and faculty travel and research in Kodiak. The National Science Foundation, the National Geographic Society, and the North Pacific Research Board have provided funding for the Alutiiq Museum to facilitate our projects, outreach, and partnerships. For all these funding applications, we have relied on close consultation with the Alutiiq Museum to plan for field, research, and outreach needs that will benefit the research projects, the museum, and the wider community.

CONCLUSIONS

Each community and archaeological context are different, and this case study from Kodiak is not meant to serve as a blueprint for success in collaboration. Instead, it is meant to offer a personal story of the evolution of a relationship between myself—an academic archaeologist—and the Alutiiq Museum in its role as a community liaison. The lessons learned from building and maintaining this relationship may be applied in many contexts where small communities are interested in sharing their cultural histories and values and the different ways in which archaeological researchers might support that effort. A community liaison like the Alutiiq Museum encourages researchers to take off their “academic hats” to listen and center respectful partnerships, evolve with the needs of the liaison, and provide resources to support outreach and collaboration efforts. The products described here—the Ancestral

Alutiiq Foods Poster and *Coloring Iqalluut*—serve as case studies for the value of these partnerships, and hopefully as inspiration for future projects.

END NOTES

1. The University of Washington's Burke Museum, the Alaska State Museum, the Museum of the Aleutians, and the Abbe Museum are examples of museums that actively engage with Indigenous communities in a research setting.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is indebted to Amy Steffian, Patrick Saltonstall, Molly Odell, and Sven Haakanson, Jr., for their years of friendship, support, guidance, and mentorship. The projects described here were funded by the North Pacific Research Board, the Kodiak Island Borough School District READ project, Boston University's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program, and Boston University's Mobius Fund.

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