



## Alaska Native Culture Fact Sheet

### Alaska Native culture

Alaska Native people's ancestry can be traced back hundreds of thousands of years to when the first descendants crossed the Bering Land Bridge from Asia to North America. Today, Alaska Native people make up about 15% of Alaska's total population, with 229 federally recognized tribes living across the state. Many still practice traditional subsistence hunting and fishing, while others have blended their customs and traditions with a Western lifestyle. Alaska's Native people are divided into 11 distinct cultures. These cultures are categorized by similarities in tradition, language and geographic regions. From the Inupiat of the Arctic Slope region above the Arctic Circle to the Tlingit of the Inside Passage, cultural diversity is a hallmark of the state.

### Athabascans

The largest population of Athabascan can be found in the Southcentral and Interior regions of Alaska, while their early territory ranged from the Brooks Range in Alaska's Far North to Cook Inlet in Southcentral Alaska and near Norton Sound in the west to the Canadian border and further. As the Athabascan people are known for their innovation and survival skills in a harsh environment, they rely on moose, caribou, plants, berries and fish for subsistence. Athabascan art is highlighted by the intricate skin sewing skills with the use of pelts gathered from big game in the region. Athabascan beadwork and embroidery is recognized as some of the finest in the world.

### Experiencing Athabascan culture

[Eklutna Historical Park](#), 26 miles north of Anchorage, provides a glimpse into Dena'ina Athabascan culture and the influence of Russian Orthodox missionaries.

A fly-in excursion to Fort Yukon on the Arctic Circle will give you a picture of life on the Yukon River in Alaska's largest Athabascan village.

In Fairbanks, a tour on the [Riverboat Discovery](#) will introduce visitors to life in an Athabascan village and includes beading demonstrations and explanations of traditional hunting and trapping practices.

Discover Alaska's Interior through exhibits, films, performances, and events at the [Morris Thompson Cultural and Visitors Center](#).

### Tlingit, Haida, Eyak and Tsimshian

The Inside Passage of Alaska was shaped by the Northwest Coast tribes — the Tlingit, Haida, Eyak and Tsimshian. Known for their skills as fishermen, hunters, artisans and carvers, the indigenous people of the region were able to cultivate a culture of art. Some of the most iconic works of art from this region include the intricate totem poles, with some that reach heights of 90 feet. Today, craftsmen of the region are known for their handmade dance masks, decorative paddles, button blankets and finely woven cedar bark and spruce root baskets.

### **Experiencing Tlingit, Haida, Eyak, and Tsimshian culture**

Chief Shakes Island, in Wrangell, features an impressive collection of totem poles and the Shakes Community House. Tlingit and Tsimshian petroglyphs can also be found at [Petroglyph Beach State Historic Site](#).

[Saxman Native Village](#), located three miles south of Ketchikan, has more than two dozen cedar totem poles, comprising one of the world's largest collections of totemic art in the world. Ketchikan is also home to [Totem Bight State Historical Park](#), featuring the largest collection of totems in Alaska, and [Totem Heritage Center](#), which has some of the world's oldest totem poles.

The [Sheldon Museum & Cultural Center](#) in Haines is a cultural and historic center with Tlingit exhibits, featuring basketry, carvings and informational displays on fishing and dance.

In Sitka, [Sitka National Historical Park](#) also features a large collection of totem poles arranged along a mile-long walking path through the forest. At the visitor center, Tlingit carvers work on new poles and other carvings and answer questions about their craft.

Participate in workshops on topics like Alaska Native art, woodworking, weaving, song and dance, and more at Glacier Bay's [Huna Tribal House](#).

Visit the [Sealaska Heritage Institute](#) in Juneau for Southeast Alaska cultural exhibits, art, and a Tsimshian cedar clan house.

Support Alaska's largest Native Tlingit village of Hoonah with cruises that call on [Icy Strait Point](#), an Alaska Native-owned and operated destination offering cultural storytelling and dance performances, cooking classes, wildlife viewing tours, and other adventures.

### **Unangaġ and Sugpiaq (Alutiiq)**

The Unangaġ and Sugpiaq (Alutiiq) tribes of the Aleutian Islands were the first Alaskans in contact with Europeans hired to explore for the czars of Russia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These maritime people depend on fish, sea otters, seals and whales for subsistence. Today the Russian influence on their way of life remains and the Russian Orthodox Church plays a large part in their lives. The largest single population of Unangaġ and Sugpiaq people lives on the Pribilof Islands – St. Paul and St. George – in the Bering Sea. Others remain in the Aleutian Islands, on Kodiak Island and throughout the Alaska Peninsula.

### **Experiencing Unanga̋ and Sugpiaq culture**

The [Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository](#) in Kodiak provides a general overview of prehistoric Sugpiaq/Alutiiq life and includes an exhibit gallery, traveling displays, a repository and museum store. [Discover Kodiak](#) also provides visitor information on the six Alaska Native villages on the island and on other activities such as bear viewing on the coast of Katmai National Park & Preserve.

Owned by the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people who have inhabited Kodiak Island for over 7,000 years, admire Alaska's beautiful wilderness at the [Kodiak Brown Bear Center & Lodge](#).

### **Yup'ik and Cu'pik**

Named after the two main dialects of the Yup'ik language, the Yup'ik and Cup'ik people live in various parts of Western Alaska, most commonly along the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers. The largest Yup'ik community in Alaska is Bethel, which serves as a hub to several smaller villages in the area. It was common for the Yup'ik to rely on the rivers and tributaries for traveling to villages and to facilitate hunting and fishing, this lifestyle is still common in today's Yup'ik and Cu'pik culture.

### **Experiencing Yup'ik and Cu'pik culture**

Located on the Kuskokwim Campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks in Bethel, the [Yup'it Piciryarit Cultural Center](#) is a unique facility that celebrates Yup'ik culture.

The annual [Cama-i Dance Festival](#) in Bethel features song and dance from the Native people in the Bethel region and beyond. Held each March, the festival draws participants from surrounding villages and across North America.

### **Iñupiat and St. Lawrence Island Yup'ik**

The Iñupiat and St. Lawrence Island Yup'ik people reside in small towns and villages in the North and Northwest region of Alaska. Primarily hunting and gathering societies, they largely subsist on what the land provides – hunting whales, seals, walrus and other large animals and gathering berries in season. They also hunt birds and fish when the conditions are right. This region of the state features three larger “hub” communities – Nome, Kotzebue and Utqiagvik – while the rest of the region is composed primarily of small rural villages accessible only by air.

### **Experiencing Inupiat and St. Lawrence Island Yupik culture**

The [Iñupiat Heritage Center](#) in Utqiagvik is part museum, part meeting space and part cultural venue. It includes a cultural arts exhibit room with 14 historical exhibits of the Inupiat people.

The [Northwest Arctic Heritage Center](#), located in Kotzebue, is jointly managed by the National Park Service and NANA, an Alaska Native corporation. The center provides Arctic visitors a new destination for information and cultural events.

In Utqiagvik, discover firsthand the lifestyles of Alaska's Iñupiat peoples on a tour of the village with a local host on a day or overnight trip with [Northern Alaska Tour Company](#) or [Tundra Tours](#).

### **Additional Resources**

The Anchorage Museum's permanent collection depicts 10,000 years of Alaska history and culture. Its newest addition, the [Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center](#), includes rare Alaska Native heritage objects from the Smithsonian Institution.

The [Alaska Native Heritage Center](#) is a cultural center in Anchorage depicting the heritage of Alaska's eleven major cultural groups. The center hosts Native dance performances, classes and special events.

The [University of Alaska Museum of the North](#) in Fairbanks features cultural and historical exhibits from all regions of the state, as well as 2,000 years of art including ivory carvings and Alaska Native paintings and sculptures.

The [Alaska State Museum](#) is located in Juneau and hosts a spectacular collection of Alaska artifacts and objects from Iñupiat, Athabascan, Aleut and Northwest Coast groups.