

A Critical Assessment

Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People of Southern Alaska

“What does it mean to be Alutiiq?”

— Opening question of *Looking Both Ways*

On the surface, *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People of Southern Alaska* is a straightforward anthropological exhibit located on the second floor of the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH). Positioned between the exit for the IMAX theatre and the elevator, the traveling exhibit experiences spurts of heavy visitor traffic at the end of every IMAX movie. Many visitors quickly glance at the exhibit cases clustered in the center of the exhibit space as they hurry to catch the elevator; others stop momentarily to comment on or briefly study one of the more eye-catching objects, such as a beaded headdress from the Alaska Peninsula. Those visitors who wish to learn more about the Alutiiq people of Alaska spend a considerably longer amount of time reading the exhibition’s extensive text panels, which are positioned around the perimeter of the exhibit space.

Beyond the object cases and text panels lies another aspect of the exhibition—that of a community-focused public program for the many Alutiiq people living along the southern coast of Alaska. Produced in collaboration with the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, *Looking Both Ways* was inspired by a community interest in studying first-hand and learning from Alutiiq artifacts held in the Smithsonian’s collections. In September 1997, the exhibition’s curators met with a group of Alutiiq elders in order to determine which pieces would be included in the exhibit. This planning conference was the first time that members of all the Alutiiq communities were brought together and included an opening ceremony with traditional dances performed by local youth, discussion forums and interactive showcases where participants could handle the Alutiiq collections.

While the planning conference succeeded in providing a forum for the community’s voice to be heard and responded to, the exhibition fails despite its detailed description of Alutiiq heritage and identity. Throughout the exhibit, the language and voice of the Alutiiq is secondary to the anthropological research. Alutiiq words and phrases are used as headlines for all the major text panels as well as included throughout the text. Quotes from interviews with Alutiiq elders are used to reinforce the existence of a contemporary Alutiiq voice. However, extracted from a larger narrative, the testimony is too fragmented to get a real sense of “what it means to be Alutiiq” (a question posed at the onset of the exhibition). Numerous maps, charts, photographs and illustrations drawn by non-Alutiiq artists convey a removed and sterile representation of a rich and closely-knit culture. The academic nature of the text assumes its audience is familiar and comfortable with anthropological interpretation.

In addition, the groupings of the objects are, for the most part, divided into distinct anthropological categories: ritual objects, domestic tools and hunting supplies. Even though the

exhibit provides a thorough account of the anthropological research done by the museum's Arctic Studies Center, it fails to show visitors how the a typical Alutiiq household would include several or all of the objects on display. Again, the "voice" of the Alutiiq takes a secondary role behind the larger body of anthropological research represented in the exhibition.

The most effective show of the Alutiiq community's voice on exhibit in *Looking Both Ways* is perhaps the short video that runs on a continuous loop in the corner of the exhibit space. The video documents the planning conference previously mentioned. Short clips show the Alutiiq children performing traditional dances, the Alutiiq elders participating in the opening ceremony and the Alutiiq community openly discussing their desire to preserve their language and heritage before both are lost. Watching the video, visitors can get a glimpse of the Alutiiq community's dedication to their culture and its future. Testimony given by one woman reiterates the exhibition's mission to fulfill the Alutiiq's desire to have a personal interaction with cultural objects from the past. According to her, viewing the object alone is not important enough. Instead, doing an activity with the object is what is important because it "does something for [her] body and spirit."

Does *Looking Both Ways* fulfill the needs of its audience? In order to know the answer, one must first identify who the audience is. If the audience is the Alutiiq community, then the answer is definitely positive. The Alutiiq people desired a chance to develop a personal relationship with objects that were previously stored at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. and that they had little access to. The planning conference succeeded in providing just that. Because of the planning conference, they were able to come together as a greater Alutiiq community and celebrate their cultural heritage on a scale larger than they ever have before. Clips from interviews taken for the documentary show community member after community member remarking on the importance of the chance they were given to hold and touch the objects made by their ancestors. For many of the elders, the experience evoked long-buried memories of a very different time.

But if the audience is the non-Alutiiq visitor asking, "What does it mean to be Alutiiq?" then *Looking Both Ways* falls short in providing a meaningful and accessible answer. Ideas of history, values, traditions, and spiritual beliefs—all which are said to be at the heart of Alutiiq identity—are left to anthropologists to explain instead of the Alutiiq themselves. The result is an exhibition rich in a people's culture but lacking in a people's voice. In the end, however, to those visitors truly interested in anthropological study and the native peoples of southern Alaska, the exhibition provides a thorough and well-illustrated portrait of the Alutiiq. If the curators in the Department of Anthropology continue to address the needs of the peoples represented in its many collections, then perhaps future community-involvement initiatives will include not only advisory panels, but curators, educators and script writers.