

What does Mother Languages Day mean to you?

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by Dr. Alisha Agisaq Drabek, second language Alutiiq speaker and learner

Erinarpet OUR VOICES



Kodiak by Alutiiq Language
Speakers & Learners



Alutiiq Elder Phyllis Peterson from Kaguyak works with Alisha Drabek.

Today is International Mother Language Day. In 1999, UNESCO proclaimed February 21st a worldwide annual celebration to promote linguistic and cultural diversity awareness.

There are over 3,000 endangered languages across the planet. But rather than mourn the potential loss of these languages, it is much healthier to celebrate their vast diversity, learn a bit about them, and look for ways to help encourage them as living languages. Here on Kodiak Island the *Sugt'stun*, or Alutiiq language is one of those 3,000 endangered languages.

On February 2nd, a group of Alutiiq speakers and learners gathered for an Alutiiq Language Summit to reflect on how far our Alutiiq language speaking community has come in building learning opportunities on Kodiak Island. We talked about how most Kodiak community members do not know much about our Alutiiq language community, or why we love our language, or why we want others to learn it.

Through our discussions, we agreed to start this newspaper column to help share our stories. We named

this column *Erinarpet* in Alutiiq, which translates to “*Our Voices*”. Each Wednesday, this column will highlight interesting information about the Alutiiq language and the stories about learners and speakers who are keeping Alutiiq a living language.

Before getting involved in Alutiiq language education, I didn't know that International Mother Language Day existed. I first started actively learning to speak Alutiiq thirteen years ago in 2004. I know the exact date because my second son was three weeks old when I officially became an Alutiiq Language Apprentice in an Alutiiq Museum education program. My infant son and I went on to visit daily with fluent first-language speaking Alutiiq Elders for several years. Our journey led me to teach Alutiiq, create educational materials, and continue to contribute to a variety of language programs that now serve all ages.

Today, because of our Elder speakers and the education opportunities we've grown collectively, we now have a small group of Intermediate-level second

language speakers and a larger group of Novice-level speakers.

Born and raised here, one of the things I love best about Kodiak is how wonderfully diverse our community is. The Alutiiq people have made the Kodiak archipelago our homeland for over 7,000 years. Yet, today the Alaska Native population comprises less than 13% in the City of Kodiak.

Over 200 years ago, Russia colonized our community, making the Russian language and culture the first new culture to integrate into our region. In fact most modern Alutiiq words start with Russian roots.

Beginning in the mid-1800s and more heavily after Alaska became a US territory in 1867, English speaking immigrants and Americans began making Kodiak their home. As local commercial fisheries grew in the 1900s, Filipino immigrants began to settle in Kodiak, now comprising over 30% of the City of Kodiak population and sustaining a strong Tagalog speaking heritage. Then in the 1980-90s, Kodiak's Hispanic community became our next major language community, now comprising 17% of Kodiak's population.

Considering the largest language communities in Kodiak today, the chart below highlights the number of first and second language speakers. Seeing the magnitude of how many speakers use the other languages spoken in Kodiak should help put into perspective the relevancy and importance of Alutiiq for the Kodiak community.

Kodiak's Most Spoken Languages

Language	Speakers Worldwide	Speakers in US
English	983.5 million	280.6 million
Spanish	527.9 million	56.5 million
Russian	267.9 million	2.9 million
Tagalog	24.6 million	1.6 million
Kodiak Alutiiq	> 50	> 50

Chart data for English, Spanish, Russian and Tagalog provided from www.ethnologue.com

Kodiak's linguistic history is something to be proud of because we have so many diverse language communities living together in harmony. We all can enjoy this diversity by reading the multilingual room signage posted at Kodiak College and by paying attention to the diversity of conversations across our community.

When I visit the grocery store and hear another language being spoken, I try to exchange a word or phrase of what I have learned from their language so that I can show respect for their efforts to maintain their cultural and linguistic identities in shared public spaces so often dominated by English. Likewise when I see former students, or fellow Alutiiq speakers, I offer greetings in Alutiiq so that we too can practice and help keep Alutiiq a living language. Several Elders who have taught me say how

much it means to hear learners speaking in public, when as children our Elders were punished physically for speaking Alutiiq.

"Language is central to culture, identity and heritage. The right to use your own language is an internationally recognized human right," declares the Human Rights Commission of New Zealand.

At the same time as acknowledging Kodiak's linguistic diversity, it's also important to recognize that Alutiiq is unique among Kodiak's languages. Alutiiq is not just another community language. It is the language born of this place, and it will continue to teeter on the brink of extinction unless our whole community is ready to help keep it alive.

Even for community members with no family ties to the Alutiiq community, there are ways to support

and celebrate our local endangered language. Everyone has access to explore Alutiiq language learning resources. We can all enjoy a sense of pride when we hear Alutiiq spoken in public, knowing that this language has been spoken here for thousands of years. And we can all help keep it safe to speak Alutiiq at home and in public.

Language is part of every person's identity and sense of wellbeing. To foster community wellness is to make space for the full diversity of mother languages in our midst. Isn't it the entire Kodiak Island community's responsibility to help keep Alutiiq a living language?

Learn more about the Alutiiq language at: www.alutiiqlanguage.org or www.alutiiqmuseum.org
Facebook: Alutiiq Language Speakers & Learners