Alutiiq Language on the Mend

Monday, 16 January 2012

{audio}/images/stories/mp3/alutiiq_language_jan_16.mp3{/audio}

Jennifer Canfield/KMXT

With fewer than 150 known fluent speakers, the Alutiiq language is just one of many indigenous languages worldwide that are in danger of extinction. However, with the concerted efforts from people like April Counceller, that won't happen. Counceller is the language manager at the Alutiiq Museum and the director for a new Alutiiq studies program at the Kodiak College. Last week the museum was awarded a $40,000 grant to complete a book on the orthography of the Kodiak sub-dialect of the Alutiiq language, for which only 45 known fluent speakers remain. Counceller says the project comes at a key stage after many years of creating language materials and developing speakers.

"We now have this group of intermediate fluent speakers that needs this. This isn't something we would have needed five years ago because we didn't have anyone that would have used it. But now were getting to the point where we do have those intermediate speakers that are not fully fluent, but they're getting there and that's why I think this is so important."

Counceller says the idea for the book came as a result of her work on a similar book for the Chugach dialect of the language, which is spoken in Prince William Sound and on the Kenai Peninsula.

"We thought it would be such an easy jump once that manuscript is done to create the Kodiak version."

Counceller

says Dr. Jeff Leer, an early researcher of the language, was integral to establishing Alutiiq as a written language in the late 70s. Leer, who is now in retirement, will be a major contributor to the book, which seeks to standardize the Alutiiq writing system. The book will also be used in the newly established Alutiiq studies program at the Kodiak College.