

Punuk harpoon line attachment for a sealskin kayak float, St. Lawrence Island (5.3 cm H), and a Punuk mouthpiece for inflating the float (3.4 cm W x 3 cm H).



Bruce White photo

The line from the harpoon head is attached to an inflated sealskin float (usually placed behind the kayak hatch) to prevent a harpooned seal from sinking and being lost. The line is attached to a connector such as the example shown at the left above (representing two seals). At another place on the sealskin float there is a mouthpiece used for inflation, and that is sealed with a wood plug in the top hole. Grooves at the bottom of both objects are used to attach them to the float by binding the sealskin tightly with wet sinew, that shrinks to make a tight seal when it has dried.



Bottom view of objects shown above

Punuk ivory line attachment in the shape of a whale tooth for use with an inflated sealskin float. The attachment hole has radiating lines to indicate an eye, next to an engraved animal mouth when viewed horizontally. 6.2 cm



Side and bottom views. Note the apparently non-functional depression in the bottom, that corresponds to an analogous depression in the bottom of the somewhat smaller float attachment shown on the previous page. These depressions may have been made to hold a “magic” quartz crystal or some other charm used to bring good luck in hunting, similar to that used in the wood whale effigy shown below.



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Inupiaq wooden whale effigy from Little Diomed Island, Alaska, from the 1800s, collected by Henry B. Collins in 1929. National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian institution, #347918, 20 cm. “Ritually potent quartz crystals were inserted into the blowhole and the eyes, and there is a space under the board in the center where a large crystal was kept. The board was lashed on the umiak through the holes on the sides, for good luck when hunting.” From Valérie Chaussonnet, *Crossroads Alaska – Native Cultures of Alaska and Siberia*, Smithsonian Institution, 1995, p. 93.