

Culturally Respectful Wildlife Interpretation: Building Empathy, Stewardship, and Conservation.

Culture, Empathy, and Conservation

Including culture in wildlife interpretation helps us tell a more complete story. Wildlife is connected not only to ecosystems, but also to people, communities, histories, and relationships with place. When interpretation respectfully includes these connections, it can help visitors see animals as more than something to observe, they become part of a larger network of relationships that we all share.

Culturally inclusive interpretation can build understanding, perspective-taking, respect, and empathy. These connections can encourage people to care more deeply about wildlife and the places they depend on, helping turn understanding into caring and caring into conservation action.

Understanding and Respecting Indigenous Peoples and Knowledges

- **Indigenous Knowledges (IKs) are knowledge systems.**
They are built through generations of careful observation, experience, practice, and sharing. Indigenous Knowledges include Indigenous Sciences and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).
- **Different knowledge systems can exist together.**
Indigenous Knowledges and Western science may approach or describe the natural world differently. One does not need to replace the other; both can contribute to understanding animals, ecosystems, and environmental change.
- **Relationships are important.**
Many Indigenous Knowledge systems understand humans, animals, plants, lands, and waters through relationships and kinship. This can include recognizing animals and other beings as more-than-human relatives rather than simply as resources.
- **If a visitor dismisses Indigenous Knowledges:**
You might say:
 - “Indigenous Knowledges come from generations of observation and experience. Different knowledge systems can exist together and help us understand the natural world in different ways.”
- **Know what is yours to share.**
Do not speak on behalf of Indigenous peoples or communities or share cultural, sacred, or personal knowledge that is not yours to share.
- **If a visitor asks an inappropriate or intrusive question:**
Questions based on stereotypes, asking for personal information, or requesting sacred or cultural knowledge may need to be redirected.
 - For example:
 - “Do all Native people believe that?”
 - “Can you teach me a ceremony?”
 - “What tribe are you from?”
 - A simple response is:
 - “That’s not something I can speak to, but I’m happy to share what I’ve learned and have permission to share about...”

Interpretation and Response Strategies

- **Context, respect, and relationships matter.**
- **Share your connection.**

When appropriate, introduce yourself, where you are from, your relationship to the place, and where the knowledge you are sharing comes from. This helps visitors understand your perspective and role.
- **Give credit to the source.**

When sharing Indigenous Knowledges, identify where the knowledge came from whenever possible. **You are sharing knowledge—not presenting yourself as the authority.**
- **Use relational language.**

Language can acknowledge the people and relationships behind the knowledge.

 - For example:
 - “An Elder shared...”
 - “In Sugpiaq Knowledge systems...”
 - “What I’ve been taught is...”
 - “I learned this from...”
 - “Knowledge shared by ____ tells us...”
- **Share multiple ways of knowing.**

Indigenous Sciences and Western science can offer different, complementary ways of understanding animals, ecosystems, and environmental change. Avoid presenting one as more legitimate than the other.
- **Connect ecology, culture, and relationships.**

Wildlife may have ecological importance as well as deep cultural, spiritual, and community significance. Interpretation should make space for these connections when appropriate.

 - Examples for interpreters:
 - “This species is important not only ecologically, but also culturally and spiritually to people in this region.”
 - “Indigenous Knowledges reflect generations of observation, experience, and relationships with this ecosystem.”
 - “Western science tells us ____, while Indigenous Knowledge shared by ____ also helps us understand ____.”

Acknowledging Alaska Native Peoples and Stewardship

- **Alaska Native peoples are an important part of Alaska today.**

Alaska is home to many distinct Indigenous peoples, cultures, communities, and languages. Alaska Native cultures are living and evolving—not something that exists only in the past.
- **Use the right terminology.**

Alaska Native refers broadly to the Indigenous peoples of Alaska. **Native Alaskan** can simply mean someone who was born in Alaska. When possible, use the specific name a person, community, or people uses for themselves.
- **Know whose homeland you are visiting.**

Seward is located within the traditional homeland of Sugpiaq/Alutiiq peoples. Acknowledging this connection recognizes the long and continuing relationships between Indigenous peoples, lands, waters, and wildlife.

- **Know the local community.**

The Qutekcak Native Tribe is the local Tribal organization in Seward. Qutekcak comes from an Alutiiq/Sugpiaq name associated with the area and is commonly translated as “Big Beach.”

- **Remember that Seward's Alaska Native community is diverse.**

Today, Alaska Native people from many different cultural and regional backgrounds call Seward home. Historical events, movement between communities, employment, family connections, and institutions such as the Jesse Lee Home have all contributed to the community that exists today.

- **For interpreters:**

Avoid speaking about Alaska Native peoples only in the past tense. When discussing traditional practices or historical relationships, look for opportunities to acknowledge continuity and contemporary stewardship:

- “Sugpiaq people have maintained relationships with the lands, waters, and wildlife of this region for generations, and those relationships continue today.”

Interpreting Animals in Human Care with a Culturally Inclusive Lens

- Animals in human care often have individual histories involving rescue, rehabilitation, veterinary care, and decisions about release. Cultural context can be an important part of telling those stories accurately and respectfully.
- **Tell the whole story.** When explaining why an animal is in human care or cannot be released, recognize that decisions may involve animal health and welfare, ecology, regulations, and cultural agreements or consultation with Indigenous peoples.
- **Avoid a single-authority narrative.** Rather than saying “NOAA decided” or “the facility decided,” explain that decisions can involve multiple partners, requirements, and perspectives.
- **Be careful with rescue language.** Avoid framing people as the “heroes” and the animal as helpless. Focus on what happened, what the animal needed, and the care or support provided.
- **Recognize cultural relationships with the species.** An animal can have biological, ecological, cultural, spiritual, and subsistence significance. When that context has been appropriately shared, it can help visitors understand why decisions surrounding an animal may extend beyond the individual animal.
- **Respect the limits of the story.** Cultural agreements or Indigenous involvement do not mean interpreters should explain cultural reasoning they have not been given permission or knowledge to share.
- **Think beyond:** “Why is this animal here?”
Also consider: “Who has a relationship with this species, and what perspectives and responsibilities are part of its story?”

Interpreting Animals in Natural Habitats with a Culturally Inclusive Lens

- Seeing wildlife in its natural habitat creates an opportunity to interpret the animal as part of a larger network of **relationships among wildlife, people, land, water, and place.**
- **Start with place.** Help visitors understand that the landscape they are experiencing is both wildlife habitat and the homeland of Indigenous peoples with longstanding and continuing relationships to that place.

- **Move beyond identification.** Instead of stopping at *“That’s a harbor seal,”* connect what guests are observing to habitat, seasonal cycles, other species, people, and—when appropriate—cultural knowledge.
- **Interpret relationships, not just facts.** Encourage visitors to notice what the animal is doing and how it interacts with its surroundings. Cultural perspectives can expand a wildlife encounter from *“What animal did we see?”* to *“What can we learn by observing this animal and its relationships?”*
- **Connect past and present.** When discussing longstanding relationships with wildlife, make clear that Indigenous knowledge, stewardship, harvesting practices, and relationships with these species continue today.
- **Let observation create connection.** Encourage guests to watch without immediately imposing human emotions or motivations. Careful observation can build curiosity, respect, and empathy while honoring the animal as a wild being.
- **Model respectful relationships with wildlife.** How a tour approaches, observes, talks about, and leaves an animal communicates values. Giving wildlife appropriate space and minimizing disturbance are part of interpreting respect—not simply rules to follow.
- **Think beyond:** *“What can I tell guests about this animal?”*
Also consider: *“What relationships are we witnessing, and how can I help guests experience this animal and place with respect?”*

The key distinction in interpreting animals in human care vs. animals in the wild, is that human-care interpretation explains the responsibilities and perspectives involved in caring for an individual animal, while natural-habitat interpretation helps guests recognize their own place within a much larger set of relationships with wildlife, ecosystems, Indigenous peoples, and place.

Connecting with Kenai Fjords' Wildlife

Hello (Cama'i)

Welcome to Kenai Fjords. This guide introduces some of the wildlife you may encounter and the English and Sugt'stun names of many of the region's most recognizable wildlife. Seward is located on the ancestral homeland of the Sugpiaq (Alutiiq) people, where Sugt'stun is the traditional language and communities have thrived for thousands of years. As you explore, we invite you to grow your connection to and appreciation for the lands, waters, people, and wildlife that make Alaska extraordinary.

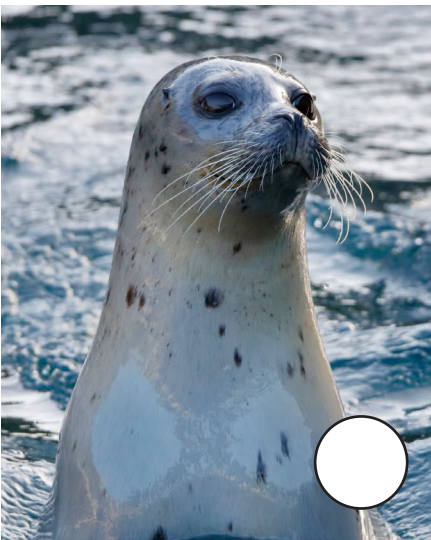
What did you see today?

Mammals

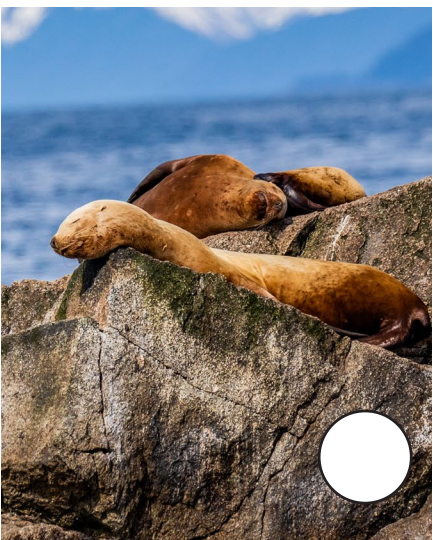
Marine mammals are part of a larger story—one that connects the ocean, the coast, and communities across Alaska. With deep cultural and ecological importance, they offer a highly visible reminder of the health of the waters they call home. When marine mammals thrive, it reflects the strength and balance of the wider marine ecosystem.



Sea Otter
(Otter: Arhnaq)

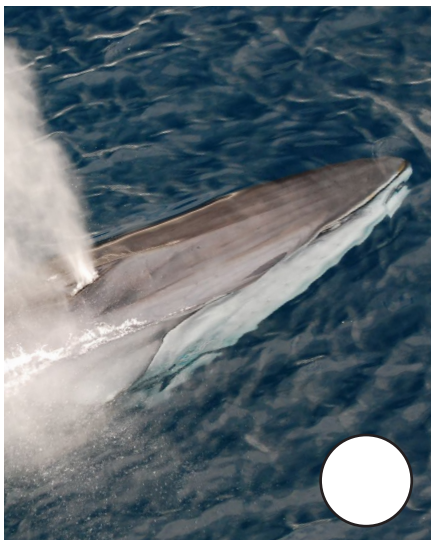


Harbor Seal
(Seal: Qaiqyaq)



Steller Sea Lion
(Sea Lion: Wiinaq)

Whales (Ar'ut)



Fin Whale



Gray Whale



Humpback Whale



Dall's Porpoise



Orca
(Orca: Arlluk)

Each summer Kenai Fjords becomes the feeding grounds for many whale species. When a whale surfaces, it's hard not to feel a sense of connection to the ocean. Many of these species travel thousands of miles and return to these same waters for generations, reminding us how much life depends on a healthy ocean.

LIVE CAM



Watch a livestream of wild Steller sea lions on Chiswell Island, the same camera feed Alaska SeaLife Center scientists use to monitor this endangered population.

Birds

Each spring, thousands of migratory birds return to Kenai Fjords National Park to nest and raise their young. Taking time to notice these birds helps us better understand and appreciate the world we share.



Common Murre



Double-Crested Cormorant
(Cormorant: Agasuuq)



Kittiwake (gull)
(Gull: Qatayaq)



Harlequin Duck
(Duck: Saqulaaq)



Black Oystercatcher
(Oystercatcher: Kiwiksaq)



Bald Eagle
(Eagle: Kum’agyak)



Horned Puffin
(Puffin: Ngaq’ngaq)



Tufted Puffin
(Puffin: Ngaq’ngaq)

Puffins can fly hundreds of miles and often reunite with the same mate each year. Their affectionate greeting, called “billing” resembles a kiss as they rub their bills together. These behaviors show that family bonds aren’t unique to humans. Across the natural world, animals form relationships that help them survive and thrive.

Thank you (Quyana)

As your journey comes to a close, we hope today's experience has deepened your appreciation for the beauty and wonder of Alaska and the wildlife, coastal ecosystems, and communities that make this place so special. Located on the ancestral homeland of the Sugpiaq (Alutiiq) people, Seward has long been shaped by generations of connection to the lands, waters, and living resources. We honor the enduring culture, language, history, and vibrant traditions of the Sugpiaq people, and hope you leave with lasting memories, a deeper connection to this remarkable place, and a renewed appreciation for all that makes it unique.



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This guide was created in partnership with Kenai Fjords Tours, the Alaska SeaLife Center, and the ACE for Wildlife Network.

Empathy in the Wild

Connecting Wildlife Experiences to Caring & Conservation

Empathy-based interpretation helps people move beyond simply **seeing wildlife** to noticing, understanding, and caring about the animals, habitats, and relationships they are witnessing. When we encounter wildlife in its natural habitat, **we are visitors in the animal's space**. Our role is to help guests slow down, observe what is actually happening, consider the animal's needs and perspective, build meaningful connections, and recognize how caring for wildlife can lead to conservation.

From Seeing to Caring & Conservation

OBSERVE → UNDERSTAND → CONNECT → CARE & RESPECT → CONSERVATION & STEWARDSHIP

Each step builds on the one before it. We do not need to begin an encounter by asking guests to protect wildlife. First, help them **notice it, understand it, and build a connection with it**.

OBSERVE | Let Wildlife Lead

Help guests **notice before explaining**.

- Focus attention on the animal and what it is actually doing.
- Observe behaviors such as: feeding, resting, traveling, communicating, or caring for young
- Notice the habitat and other species around it.
- Allow quiet time to simply watch.
- Avoid immediately filling the encounter with facts.

Try asking:

- *What do you notice?*
- *What is the animal doing?*
- *What else is happening around it?*

UNDERSTAND | Add Meaning & Context

Once guests are observing, help them understand **what they are seeing and why it matters**.

- Explain behavior, adaptations, habitat needs, and ecological relationships.
- Connect behavior to what the animal may need at that moment.
- Share science that helps explain what guests are seeing.
- Share only information that is appropriate for public interpretation.
- Include appropriate Indigenous Knowledge that adds understanding of wildlife, place, and relationships.
- Recognize Indigenous Knowledge as a living knowledge system developed through generations of observation, experience, relationships, and knowledge sharing.
- Attribute knowledge to the appropriate community, Knowledge Holder, or source.
- Recognize both present-day and historical relationships among Indigenous Peoples, wildlife, land, and water.

Think beyond: *What facts can I tell them?*

Consider: *What will help them better understand what they are seeing?*

CONNECT | Build Empathy & Perspective

Understanding creates opportunities for guests to see wildlife as **individual living beings with needs, experiences, and relationships within their environment.**

- Describe observable behavior rather than assuming thoughts or emotions.
- Help guests consider the animal's perspective.
- Connect individual animals to their families, populations, habitats, and ecosystems.
- Share individual stories when they are known and appropriate.
- Encourage curiosity rather than providing a human explanation for every behavior.
- Help guests discover similarities and differences without suggesting that animals experience the world exactly as humans do.

Instead of:

"That whale is excited to see us!"

Try:

"The whale changed direction as our vessel approached. What do you notice about its behavior?"

Invite perspective-taking:

- *What might this animal need right now?*
- *What does it depend on from this habitat?*
- *How could our presence affect what it is trying to do?*
- *What relationships do you notice between this animal and its environment?*

CARE | Turn Connection into Caring

When people feel connected to wildlife, they may become more interested in **what happens to the animal and the places it depends on.**

Help strengthen that connection:

- Give wildlife space and choice.
- Model respect for the animal's needs.
- Explain why you are changing speed, maintaining distance, reducing noise, or leaving an area.
- Point out behaviors that indicate an animal may need additional space.
- Connect the wellbeing of an individual animal to the health of its habitat.
- Help guests recognize that **our behavior can affect the animals we came to experience.**

Wildlife does not need to approach us or provide a dramatic encounter for the experience to be meaningful.

- **Try saying:**
 - *"We're giving these animals additional space so they can continue feeding without needing to change what they're doing because of us."*

Responsible wildlife viewing becomes more than a rule, it becomes **an immediate way to show care.**

CONSERVATION | Give Caring Somewhere to Go

Once guests have had an opportunity to **see, understand, connect, and care**, conservation becomes a natural continuation of the experience.

Connect conservation directly to what guests have just experienced.

- **Make it relevant.** Start with the animal, behavior, habitat, or relationship guests just observed.

- **Make relationships visible.** Show how wildlife, healthy habitats, people, and communities are connected.
- **Connect caring with action.** Help guests see how their choices can support wildlife.
- **Keep actions achievable.** Offer realistic opportunities rather than a long list of things people “should” do.
- **Model conservation.** Responsible wildlife viewing is already an action guests can practice.
- **Include community and Indigenous stewardship.** Where appropriate, share examples of longstanding and current care for wildlife and place.
- **Build hope and agency.** Pair conservation challenges with examples of research, restoration, community action, or conservation progress.

Possible conservation actions might include:

- Practice responsible wildlife viewing.
- Reduce disturbance to animals and sensitive habitats.
- Participate in community science.
- Protect or restore habitat.
- Learn about local wildlife and seasonal behaviors.
- Share responsible wildlife-viewing practices with others.
- Support research, community, restoration, or conservation efforts.
- Find ways to care for wildlife and habitats at home.
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Make the Conservation Connection Natural

Avoid suddenly shifting from an inspiring wildlife encounter to a list of threats. Instead, follow the connection that has already been created.

- **We observed:**
“These whales have been feeding throughout the bay this morning.”
- **We understand:**
“They are taking advantage of areas where prey is concentrated.”
- **We connect and care:**
“Giving them space allows them to continue feeding without having to respond to us.”
- **We connect to conservation:**
“Responsible wildlife viewing is one way we can help. Protecting healthy ocean habitats and reducing our impacts also help ensure wildlife has the food and space it needs.”

The conservation message becomes part of the wildlife story rather than an ending added onto it.

Let the Wildlife Lead

- **SEE** the animal and what it is doing.
- **UNDERSTAND** its behavior, needs, relationships, and habitat.
- **CONNECT** through curiosity and perspective-taking.
- **CARE** by recognizing how our presence and choices affect wildlife.
- **CONSERVE** by giving that caring meaningful ways to become action.

The goal is not simply for guests to leave knowing more about wildlife. It is to create experiences that help people see wildlife differently, build caring and connection, and recognize their own role in conservation.

Words Matter

The words we choose influence how guests understand and connect with wildlife. Use language that supports **agency, respect, curiosity, accuracy, and connection**.

Instead of...	Consider...	Why
Our whales / our animals	The whales we are observing / wildlife in this area	Wild animals do not belong to us.
They're putting on a show!	We're getting to observe incredible natural behavior.	Their behavior is not for our entertainment.
He came over to say hello.	The animal approached / moved closer to the vessel.	Describe what happened without assuming motivation.
She loves the boat.	She is remaining near the vessel. Let's watch what she does next.	Leave room for uncertainty.
They're playing with us.	We're seeing repeated approaches / dives / movements.	Describe behavior before interpreting it.
Friendly	Curious / approaching / remaining nearby	Describe observable behavior rather than human personality.
Mean / aggressive	Defensive / territorial / competing / responding to a threat	Give behavior biological and ecological context.
Lazy	Resting / conserving energy	Rest is an important behavioral need.
A nuisance / pest	Describe the species and its role or behavior	Avoid assigning value based only on human convenience.
Native legend says...	[Community / Knowledge Holder / source] shares...	Attribute knowledge rather than generalizing.
They used to...	Use past and present tense as appropriate	Indigenous cultures and relationships with wildlife continue today.

Keep in Mind

- **Observe first.** Describe what you see before interpreting behavior.
- **Let wildlife have agency.** Avoid assuming motivations, emotions, or interactions are for us.
- **Follow wildlife's lead.** A meaningful encounter does not need to be close, dramatic, or predictable.
- **Be accurate and respectful.** Use science and appropriately attributed Indigenous Knowledge to add context.
- **Use behaviorally accurate language.** Build perspective and caring while describing what animals are doing without assuming what they think, feel, or intend.
- **Give caring somewhere to go.** Connect the experience to respectful choices, stewardship, and conservation.

Developed using empathy practices from the ACE for Wildlife Network and culturally responsive interpretation resources developed by the Alaska SeaLife Center.