



Unknown people carved beachside petroglyphs.

Ancient art on Alaska's coast

Carved into stone long ago, mysterious natural images still enchant.

On a picturesque stretch of sand in the Alaska panhandle now known as **Petroglyph Beach State Historic Site**, shapes etched into big, dark stones depict spirals and dolphins, a killer whale and a raven, even human faces. No one knows the meanings of these petroglyphs, created thousands of years ago by early inhabitants—perhaps ancestors of the area's Tlingit population. The images could have marked the location as rich in resources, as salmon, sea lions, orcas, and eagles still abound there today. Or they may have been a record of potlatches (ceremonies to give gifts and property) and other significant events in tribal life.

Today, 40 of these stone carvings—the largest collection of petroglyphs in southeastern Alaska—can still be seen along the water's edge. The site is easy to reach by a moderate one-mile walk from the town of Wrangell, also known for its totem poles.

At the park, an accessible boardwalk leads to a viewing deck where visitors can make rubbings from replicas of the carvings. Or you might search along the waterline to discover the more understated, hidden petroglyphs and try to unravel their ancient mystery.

—KATHERINA AUDLEY