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Tundra Atv Trail Project Earns National Award

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A Hooper Bay resident and others who fought to keep four-wheelers from destroying important bird nests and berry patches have won a national award.

The village's ATV Trail Project Partnership, which helps keep riders from damaging tundra, was one of 21 projects across the country recognized for the U.S. Department of the Interior's Cooperative Conservation Award.

The project began several years ago when elders in the village of 1,200 began noticing a decline in black brant numbers, an important subsistence food, as well as berries, according to a nomination letter submitted by the National Park Service.

Villagers and the Sea Lion Corp., working with the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, completed a survey showing that ATV tires were smashing nests, scarring tundra and chewing up wetlands.

Educational efforts, including two-person outreach teams camped near hunting grounds, raised awareness about avoiding sensitive areas. ATV riders began following paths instead of cruising openly across the tundra, and black brant numbers recovered quickly, the nomination letter said.

To create a trail protecting wetlands near the village, Hooper Bay residents worked with the Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program in the National Park Service. They also worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The trail, built from a system of interlocking plastic grids called Geoblock, crosses sensitive wetlands from the village's edge and travels half a mile to a ridge.

The benefit of the porous trail is that it encourage ATV riders to stay on one path, in part because riders can travel quickly on it and won't be bogged down in mud, said Ryan Maroney, NRCS community planning coordinator in Bethel.

Maroney is one of the award winners. The others are William Naneng with the Sea Lion Corp. in Hooper Bay, former refuge manager Michael Rearden and Doug Staller, refuge manager.

The Sea Lion Corp. and Hooper Bay residents plan to extend the trail another eight miles to protect more areas.

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