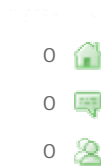


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Trail helps heal Alaska Native hunting grounds

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Rachel D'Oro, Associated Press

ANCHORAGE — This is a trail to somewhere, especially in a vast, roadless corner of Alaska.

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For Bosco Olson and his neighbors, all-terrain vehicles are the ride of choice in negotiating the rough, boggy terrain near the village of Hooper Bay on the state's western coast, where they hunt and fish, dig for clams and gather edible plants and the driftwood they use for fires.

All that activity, however, was severely trampling the fragile habitat that is so crucial to their survival. After spring thaws, the four-wheelers destroyed bird nests and sliced up berry patches, wild vegetables and grasses used for basket-weaving.

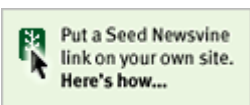
So the remote Yup'ik Eskimo community of 1,200 residents sought a modern solution to a modern problem in order to continue pursuing their ancient subsistence traditions. They teamed up with tribal and federal officials to pioneer construction of a nationally recognized trail consisting of rigid recycled-plastic grids. Villagers say the trail has greatly reduced damage to the environment in their section of

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an immense region far from Alaska's limited road system, a landscape speckled with wetlands and tundra that looks from the air like an endless sponge.

"Already the terrain that was mused up is healing," said Olson, the village administrator who has lived in Hooper Bay all of his 62 years.

Trail experts call the ongoing project a successful example of improving access to Alaska's most challenging settings. National Parks Service trails specialist Kevin Meyer, who helped get the project off the ground in 2007, said the effort fits in squarely with a national effort to create a wide range of sustainable trail designs to protect landscapes from the imprint of off-road vehicles.

"There's a scientific kind of approach, an ecological approach to these kinds of uses and these heavy mechanical-wear activities on very sensitive environments — and you can't get much more sensitive than a wetland, permafrost environment like Hooper Bay," Meyer said. "Hooper Bay demonstrates that there is a response. Fifteen years ago, there wasn't a response."

More work planned for summer will extend the trail almost another mile, bringing the total length to 4 1/2 miles, said William Naneng, manager of Sea Lion Corp., the village Native corporation involved since the beginning. To date, Sea Lion has been reimbursed nearly \$650,000 — or a bulk of the project cost — by the U.S. Department of Agriculture after the corporation paid up front for various phases of construction.

To launch the project, residents enlisted the help of the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. Ryan Maroney, a conservation planner with the agency, visited the village in 2006 and planning began in earnest, ultimately involving other federal agencies including the Park Service and the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge.

"Public participation and community involvement really does lead to better projects," Maroney said. "It's really neat to have been a part of that."

Along with construction, involved villagers worked with the agencies to educate fellow residents about the land's



In this July 24, 2008 photo provided by National Park Service, Helen S takes a stroll with her granddaughter, Mary Ford on a new environment friendly trail near Hooper Bay, Alaska. Locals worked with tribal and officials to pioneer construction of the sturdy trail to be expanded that consists of rigid recycled-plastic grids that villagers say has greatly reduced the damage to the sensitive habitat. (AP Photo/National Park Service/Kevin Meyer)

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vulnerability, spreading the message through posters, public service announcements and monitors who e that people use the trail. They've expanded the trail each year, with the ultimate goal to cover a few mor to the beach, where travel is smoother.

Hunters aren't the only ones enjoying the six-foot-wide trail. It's also a hit among bicyclists and residents just want to go for a stroll.

In 2008, the team effort was among projects across the country to win a cooperative conservation award the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Other villages in the region have taken note of the technology and are implementing comparable projects own, hiring locals for the labor-intensive installation work.

A half-mile trail was just completed on the soggy tundra from the village of Kwigillingok to local subsister streams. The village of Tununak is awaiting a similar trail to be built on half of the seven-mile distance to larger community of Toksook Bay.

Tununak is working through various agencies including the federally funded Denali Commission, which su road, energy, sanitation and other infrastructure projects in rural Alaska. Construction is expected to beg next year, said Adison Smith with the commission's transportation program. The commission is investing million for the Tununak project and another \$218,000 for the Kwigillingok trail.

Tununak tribal administrator James James, who applied for the Denali assistance, said his village lacks se found in Toksook Bay, such as doctors, nurses and dental treatment. With no road between the Yup'ik communities, traveling by ATV through the saturated terrain is difficult. It's not unheard of to get stuck c way to visit relatives, keep medical appointments and attend funerals, weddings or meetings in Toksook. During medical emergencies, villagers often wait a long time for a charter plane to arrive from the region town of Bethel, 115 miles away, when conditions are too rough for transporting ailing residents on the tu

James said the trail of rigid panels will make travel much easier.

"I think it will be a good project," he said. "It will enable the two villages to be more connected."

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