

Kenai and Kasilof Flats: A resource to cherish and conserve—not trample

by Toby Burke

Two years ago I became a resident of the Kenai Peninsula and like most new residents was immediately impressed with the richness of its natural resources. In time I became particularly captivated by the Kenai and Kasilof Flats. These two “Flats” are in fact estuaries. An estuary is the tidally influenced broad lower course of a large river and the embayment at its mouth where salt and fresh waters mix. This mixing of fresh and salt water creates a transition zone between land and sea. Estuaries are renowned for their prodigious biological productivity. Along with tropical rainforests, and coral reefs estuaries rank as the world’s most productive ecosystems, more productive than the river and ocean waters that act upon them from either side.

In an estuary, nutrient-laden river waters combine with shallow coastal waters and the upwelling of nutrient-laden deeper ocean waters to generate exceptional primary productivity which supports vigorous marine food chains. The mixing of lighter fresh water and heavier salt water trap and circulate nutrients, the majority of which are retained and recycled by benthic organisms to create an area of concentrated productivity in terms of number of individual organisms and species as well as total biomass and energy. An abundance of aquatic plants and various invertebrates provide food for fish, seabirds, shorebirds, waterfowl, and marine mammals.

Lately the Kenai and Kasilof Flats have been attracting more than just exceptional concentrations of fish and wildlife. While all motorized vehicles are forbidden on and behind the dunes of both estuaries, both areas are suffering from illegal trespass by four-wheelers, motorcycles, trucks, and snow machines. The Kasilof Flats have been trampled for years now, to the point that an extensive and spreading network of roads and trails exist on and behind the dune complex on the south side of the river. The Kenai Flats have up until the last few years escaped the trampling experienced on the Kasilof but a new road, several four-wheeler trails, and even an airplane landing strip have newly appeared on or just behind the dune line on the

south side of this river. All these activities are forbidden and these activities are occurring on public lands, both state and municipal. Local government and resource agencies are aware of the illegal activities but insist they do not have the resources to stop them and prevent further degradation.

It should be noted that the majority of the degradation of these two Flats occur during the set-net and dip-net seasons. At this time there is a concentration of motorized vehicles at the mouths of both rivers and netters waiting for the next tide go for a lengthy joy ride behind the dunes to “kill” some time. Outside of these two periods motorized vehicle trespass is generally concentrated during mild weather and on the weekends.

While this is unfortunate, concerned citizens are not powerless when it comes to protecting and conserving the Kenai and Kasilof Flats. First and foremost individuals as well as civic organizations can contact their state and local elected officials and make them aware of the degradation of these two valuable estuaries and request that action be taken to prevent further degradation. Citizens that witness motorized vehicles trespassing on the Flats should continue to report them to state and local law enforcement authorities and insist that laws protecting these areas be enforced.

When practical I have even stopped offending motorists in these protected areas and made them aware of the illegality of their activities and suggested that they return to the beachfront where their activities are allowed. Once confronted these individuals typically leave the vegetated flats and return to the unvegetated beach to resume their motorized joy ride.

The biological productivity of Kenai and Kasilof estuaries should remain a lasting source of economic, recreational, and spiritual value. But it won’t if concerned citizens look the other way. If you appreciate the Kenai and Kasilof Flats make your voice heard take an active hand in their long-term conservation.

Toby Burke is a refuge biological technician who enjoys long walks with his children on the Kenai and

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