

Refuge Recycling Guru Wins National Environmental Award



Dan Thorington, recycling manager and building custodian for the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, was honored in Washington D.C. last month as one of only ten nation-wide winners of the Department of the Interior Environmental Achievement Awards. Deputy Secretary of the Interior, Lynn Scarlett, presented Thorington with his award for his extraordinary recycling program which diverts more than 80% of the solid waste produced at Islands and Ocean Visitor Center in Homer. The awards are intended to identify and honor those individuals who develop best practices that could and should be implemented across the nation.

Thorington has a passion for recycling and green living. He took it as a personal mission to keep one of Homer's biggest buildings from becoming one of Homer's biggest waste producers. The 37,000 square foot Islands & Ocean Visitor Center, the largest U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service visitor center in Alaska, hosts 60,000 visitors and dozens of meetings, seminars and events annually. It is also the office for 30 – 40 employees of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, Kachemak Bay Research Reserve and Alaska Geographic. Through his meticulous record keeping, Thorington established that the Center generated about 10,500 lbs of waste per year. Since Thorington came on board in 2004, 37,000 pounds of that waste, cardboard, paper, glass, plastics, electronics and compost materials, have been recycled. As a result of his efforts, Islands & Ocean won Green Star Award Certification last spring.

To reduce building waste and divert waste from the landfill into productive reuse, Dan came up with a multi-pronged approach to change the behavior of visitors and office workers alike and locate outlets for Center waste. He's created recycling guides, posters, and newsletters for building workers and visitors emphasizing reduce, reuse and recycle. He's deployed multi-binned recycling and waste cans in key areas inside and outside of the building and even maintains compost collection bins in the lunch room and meeting rooms. Each office has its own paper recycling bin. Dan has even found homes for the pernicious plastic peanuts for packing materials at local galleries. He has persuaded meeting planners to stop using plastic disposable water bottles in favor of water pitchers and glasses.

When Thorington couldn't find official outlets for waste materials he came up with creative solutions frequently on his own time. He takes the compost home to his own compost pile and delivers steel cans which can't be recycled in Homer to a facility in Soldotna when he has other business in that area. Also an artist, Thorington used cast off construction materials to create a donations box for the center complete with life size oystercatcher.

His influence goes beyond the building as he has become a community go-to-guy for recycling issues giving advice to other organizations such as the Homer Police Department and South Peninsula Hospital. He has also been successful in forging a partnership with Cook Inletkeeper, Kenai Peninsula Solid Waste and numerous businesses to co-sponsor an annual electronics recycling event in Homer. Thorington recently wrote an editorial for a local paper on recycling.

According to Refuge Manager Gregory Siekaniec, Dan is the conscience of the refuge. “We are all in the conservation business so saving resources and the side benefits of recycling, reducing carbon emissions and pollution, is important to us all but knowing Dan knows what we throw away can help us make the right choice.”

Thorington is not content to rest on his laurels. He recently sent a newsletter to the staff challenging them to alter their actions enough to up the diversion rate from the current 80% to 90%. Dan’s tips of the month – buy a mug, double side your printing, make a lunch and reuse bags.

Captions: USFWS

Dan Thorington, recycling guru, in Islands & Ocean’s central consolidating area.