

RIT History

The Refuge Information Technician (RIT) program was developed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the early 1980's to communicate natural resource conservation messages. Declining populations of four species of geese in interior Alaska became a topic of great concern in the early 1980's. Federal biologists working together with local tribal leaders and councils agreed upon the need to collect waterfowl data to allow conservative harvests. The Yukon and Kuskokwim Delta residents and USFWS refuge managers had a goal of increasing awareness of the declining geese populations and developing programs that would speak to all ages. They came up with the concept of hiring local Alaskans as Refuge Information Technicians, thus creating a communication link between rural residents and USFWS managers.

The Refuge Information Technicians carry out an array of duties such as public presentation, interpreting meeting in both English and their native language, and wildlife harvest surveys. This ambitious program, and group of Alaskans, faced many challenges over the past 25 years. Since the RIT's were in uniform, the villagers often perceived them as law enforcement officers and were originally afraid to share information with them. When RITs returned home to face friends, families and neighboring villages with conservation messages they were often misunderstood or unpopular. It took several years to develop trust and a rapport to successfully confront wildlife conservation issues within individual villages.

Through RITs' ties to the rural Alaska and native culture they also became teachers to the USFWS staff and managers who were new to Alaska. The RITs became a conduit for information, concerns, and questions that rural residents had for USFWS management policies. The RIT program has broken down many barriers on the road to building relationships between rural Alaskans and the USFW Service.

Today, the Refuge Information Technician program is recognized as one of the most successful public relations programs within the USFWS. The RITs continue to carry the message of wildlife conservation to 100 villages or one third of all of Alaska's communities every year. They employ the use their traditional skills as well as skills learned from the USFW Service to bring the two worlds together for one cause, the conservation of wildlife for future generations.