

# Animal Planet Spotlights Tanana Chiefs Executive Board Member and Alaska Subsistence Culture

by Leona Long, I-AC Marketing Outreach Coordinator

For generations, Athabascan fathers have passed down to their sons the secrets to thriving in Interior Alaska, one of the harshest, most unforgiving climates in the world. Now, Tanana Chiefs Conference Executive Board Member and Allakaket's Second Chief PJ Simon shows a national television audience how he hunts and fishes for subsistence living along the Koyukuk River.

Simon stars in the much-talked-about television reality show, tentatively entitled, "American River Renegade." While, the premiere has not been formally announced by Animal Planet, PJ was interviewed by KUAC radio's Dan Bross about his involvement with the show last December 2013. The show is expected to air sometime during the first few months of 2014.

"It was an experience of a lifetime, an opportunity for me to share my pride in our subsistence way of life," says PJ, who added that he has signed a five-year contract with the network that brought the show, "Yukon Men" to the cable television's Discovery Channel.



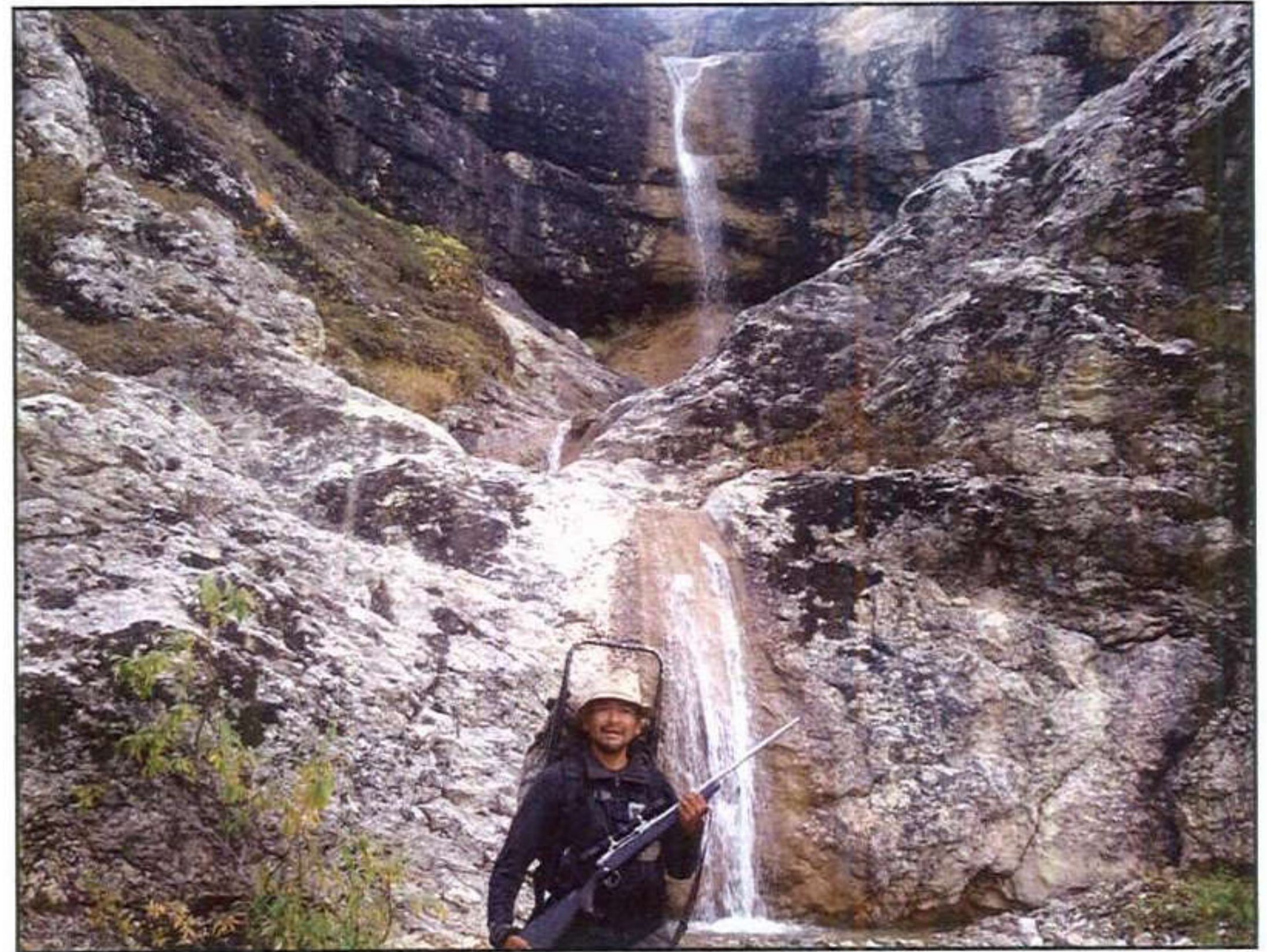
After the premiere, the six-episode first season will begin in mid-February. If the network picks up a second season, there will be 12-15 episodes. In addition to PJ, there are three other commercial fishing enterprises that are followed by "American River Renegade."

Last September, Warm Springs Productions sent out a casting call looking for tough guys that make their living off and from the river. Casting their net from the Catskills to Louisiana and as far away as the Koyukuk River, hundreds of men bombarded the Missoula, Montana based production company for a chance to be featured in the show.

"All the producers had to do was look at my Facebook Page to see I'm the real deal," says PJ, who teaches his son and the young men in Allakaket the same subsistence skills his father and elders taught him. "My goal wasn't to be on TV. I see 'American River Renegade' as an opportunity for the media to show a positive portrayal of our subsistence activities. I want every Alaska Native kid to take pride in their heritage and culture."

Warm Springs Productions' film crew flew to Allakaket several times this summer. Warmly welcomed by the village, the crew spoke to 38 school children about career opportunities in film and television. The crew visits the school in each community they visit.

"Every person with Warm Springs Productions is committed to making Alaska and our way of life look good," says PJ, who fills in for Orville Huntington as the Interior Village Representative for the Alaska Federation of Natives Executive Board. "It's been great for the kids



in Allakaket, because they can see people from Outside respect our subsistence way of life. Now the kids are more interested in setting beaver and wolf traps than playing video games."

The film crew brought more than \$1 million worth of equipment to take about 50 hours of filming for each 12-14 minutes that will be used on TV.

The crew filmed a variety of Alaska Native subsistence activities. In May, PJ took a dog sled team to hunt ducks and geese. Then in June, they headed off to Chitna to dipnet for Copper River salmon. In July, PJ built a salmon trap using all recycled materials along with a log raft fashioned from firewood, which they floated down the river.

"The crew was amazed that I could take part of a chain link fence, discarded reflective trail markers and drift wood and make a fish trap," says PJ, who is also a journeyman plumber and radio personality. "When the trap caught salmon, they marveled at my ingenuity. I told them that Athabascans are known for our resilience and resourcefulness. When we went moose hunting, they were incredulous that even a blizzard couldn't stop me."

Two years ago, PJ moved back to Allakaket to care for his aging father. It's not uncommon to see pictures of the wild geese or fish he caught to help feed the community's elders mingled with pictures of him in Washington D.C. or events like The National Congress of American Indians on his Facebook page.

Soon after returning, he realized Interior villages needed an advocate. Last October, he was elected Second Chief of his tribe and re-elected this year. In March, he was elected as an executive board member for Tanana Chiefs Conference.

"I never wanted to be a politician or TV star," says PJ. "I just want people living Interior Alaska villages to have the same resources as others in Fairbanks or Anchorage, which is why I ran for the TCC Executive Board."

