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Native subsistence hunter may be Alaska's latest reality TV star

Alex DeMarban | April 15, 2014



832



PJ Simon of the Interior Alaska village of Allakaket: "I'll go to the ends of the Earth to feed my people."
Courtesy Animal Planet

The second tribal chief of the Alaska village of [Allakaket](#) has skin in the game when it comes to promoting Native culture, after getting dragged along icy ground and suffering a minor concussion during sprint sled dog races at a recent spring festival in the Interior village of Huslia.

Turns out sprint mushing was more dangerous than PJ Simon expected. But at 42, he's just a rookie.

Simon got into mushing in the most modern of ways, after the makers of a reality TV show for Animal Planet wanted to feature him living off the land, at times using old-school techniques. Simon, both a villager and corporate leader, jumped at the chance to highlight life in the Bush.

Growing up at foot of Brooks Range

The show -- "American River Renegades" -- is set to debut on May 26 with a "sneak peak," meaning the first one-hour episode will air on a special day -- a Monday at 5 p.m. in Alaska, according to Jared Albert, senior publicist with Animal Planet. A few days later, the show will move to its normal 5 p.m. time slot on Thursdays.

Publicists have worked up a heart-throbbing bio for the program that features Simon and three other men:

American River Renegades follows a breed of men who live outside the norm and call America's rivers and tributaries home. From the ice-cold Yukon River to the big muddy Mississippi to the great Pee Dee River in South Carolina down to the flooded deltas of Louisiana, these men live and die by some of the most inhospitable terrain in the country.

There surely won't be any dying -- this is reality TV after all, with all its overwrought plots and foreboding music. But "inhospitable territory" is no exaggeration for the wild expanse where Simon lives. The Koyukon Athabaskan grew up in Allakaket at the foot of the Brooks Range, some 400 lonely miles northwest of Anchorage and where the temperature once shot to a deadly, almost record-breaking [75 below](#).

The filmmakers were smart enough to arrive in spring and summer, where they captured Simon in full subsistence swing. For the former big-game guide and plumber -- who also spent years living in the Interior village of Galena along the mighty Yukon River -- it's a chance to share his backwoods ingenuity. At one point in the first show, Simon forgets his duck call. Not to worry: He squeezes off a round and fashions a duck call from a spent shotgun shell and a lighter.

"I'll go to the ends of the Earth to feed my people," he says in a copy of the first episode provided by Albert.

No trap, but a 'fish contraption'

In another episode, Simon builds what he calls a “fish contraption” on Henshaw River, using chain-link fencing to guide salmon toward a dipnet made from chicken-wire. Simon said it would have been a trap -- illegal in Alaska for catching salmon -- but he removed the holding pen.

Is the “contraption” legal? Yes, according to Simon. But it sounds like he wouldn't be surprised if the wildlife authorities came after him when they see his fishing aid on TV.

"Anytime you say subsistence any more, the state sues you," he said, touching on a longstanding dispute between the state and federal government over where rural residents get priority for hunting and fishing. "They can bust me for using a fishing contraption if they want."

Other episodes will feature Simon building a raft from trees and floating it down the Koyukuk River, he said. They'll see him beach seine for [sheefish](#) on the [Alatna River](#). And they'll see him dipnet for salmon on the Copper River.

Simon said he hopes young Alaska Natives see the show and take pride in their culture. "I try to portray a strong Native man in Alaska, instead of the negative publicity about people getting in trouble," Simon said, referring to stereotypical views of Alaska Natives held by some people. "And I try to show people what subsistence is like in the modern-day era."

Simon has melded two worlds. In addition to serving as second chief, he's also on the executive boards for the Doyon regional Native corporation in Fairbanks and for the Tanana Chiefs Conference, which provides social services in Interior Alaska. Also, the "plumber turned activist" says he's fighting to protect Allakaket -- he moved back there two years ago from Fairbanks to be near his aging dad -- by fighting the state's goal of building a road to the Ambler mining district. He said the road would pass right over the Henshaw River, affecting a large chum salmon run that feeds into the Yukon River.

Hunting caribou, bears, wolves

Simon doesn't know how the producers -- Warm Springs Production -- found him. But he's been featured on other shows, including on a [Babe Winkelman](#) program years ago, he said. When the production company initially called him, Simon had them check out his private Facebook page, where he's posted dozens of videos related to trapping and subsistence hunting of everything from caribou to bears to wolves.

The producers were impressed and signed him up. When they wanted to know more about traditional hunting, Simon told them how he used to mush during hunts with his dad before snowmachines became ever-present in Bush Alaska.

It'd been decades since Simon has mushed a team of dogs. But [his dad, Pollack Simon Sr., still owned his old racing team](#). So when the film crews arrived in Allakaket last spring, Simon hooked up the dogs and took them upriver to film him hunting geese for the village.

After the producers left Allakaket, Simon kept on mushing, which is how he ended up in Huslia getting dragged on the ground. Fortunately, there were no camera crews to film the crashes, he said.

To reach Huslia from Allakaket, he towed 10 dogs by snowmachine about 160 miles, traveling along the Koyukuk River and stopping to meet with villagers. "It's just good clean fun, and I just wanted to highlight our rich history of sprint mushing," he said.

Simon finished last behind 10 other teams, earning the red lantern. But he said he's more interested in promoting his culture than being in the limelight.

In fact, he said he might miss the first episode of “American River Renegades.” He'll be subsistence fishing in late May, and Simon said he hopes to be outside catching whitefish and grayling.

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