



Delta blues

A PBS show in which seafood chef Rick Moonen travels up the Yukon River in search of king salmon recently won a James Beard Foundation Award for excellence in journalism. Hopefully, the luck of the Yup'ik people is turning around.

Life has never been easy up in remote Emmonak, Alaska, at the mighty Yukon River Delta. But the legend of the fish they catch continues to grow. On Sunday night, a Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) "Chefs A' Field" special about Yukon king (chinook) salmon won a James Beard Foundation Award for excellence in broadcast journalism.

[Click here](#) to check out a clip of the show. In season four's episode No. 2, "King of Alaska," noted seafood chef Rick Moonen, chef-owner of Las Vegas restaurant rm seafood, ventures to western Alaska to meet what he says is the best fish he ever ate. "Traveling up the Yukon River is an experience you will never forget," says Moonen. "The majestic beauty of the Alaskan frontier bustling with wildlife and the pure fragrance of nature itself — the Yukon River is a breath-taking experience."

It's a champagne toast for Chef Moonen, PBS and the New York-based Warner Hanson Television team that produced the show. However, the real tribute should go to Alaska's Yup'ik people and their spectacular fish that's known to store extra fat and oil for a 2,000-mile journey up a glacier-fed river to spawning grounds. Warner Hanson Television producer Heidi Hanson told me on Monday how she recalled the people "beaming with pride" showing off their prize catch when they visited two summers ago.

It sure sounds like a made-for-TV story. The truth is, though, Yukon salmon fishermen haven't had much to celebrate recently. Soon after Yukon kings hit the market running a few years ago, just when the brand began to rival that of the famous Copper River king salmon, forces of nature and fishery management kept them down and nearly off the market entirely. Jack Schultheis, GM of Kwik'Pak Fisheries in Emmonak, one of the region's few salmon buyers, knows something about disaster-stricken communities unable to fulfill their traditional livelihoods.

Last year's commercial chinook fishery on the Lower Yukon was shut down when the Alaska Department of Fish & Game expected a poor return (twice as many fish came back to the river, compounding the frustration, Schultheis says). Even subsistence fishing has been curtailed. And extreme flooding on the Yukon devastated the tiny village last spring, an event it has still not recovered from.

"It's the most poverty-stricken district in the country," says Schultheis, adding that a commercial fishery would generate about \$10 million for the region and the Yup'ik people, who only want to fish and live according to their traditional ways. "They don't have anything else," he added.

Schultheis says there will be an extremely limited supply of Yukon kings this summer — available in mid- to late June — but added that the native people will be allowed to conduct their traditional subsistence fishery. More good news: There should be plenty of Yukon chum, or silver, salmon to go around. "We're concentrating on chums till the king runs come back," says Schultheis.

The Yup'ik don't need awards, just the opportunity to fish. But the honor serves to recognize a struggling fishing community and its efforts to get back on its feet.

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