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ONLINE TOXICITY REACHES RURAL ALASKA IN “ONE WITH THE WHALE,” PREMIERING ON INDEPENDENT LENS ON APRIL 23, 2024

MARCH 15, 2024

*Heartwarming Documentary Explores Ancestral Subsistence
Hunting Practices as Alaska Native Family Endures Threats from
Animal Rights Activists*

(San Francisco, CA) March 15, 2024— Next to air in the Spring season of INDEPENDENT LENS documentaries, “One with the Whale” will premiere on April 23, 2024. Co-directed by Pete Chelkowski and environmental journalist Jim Wickens, the film explores the traditions, values, and lifestyles of a tight-knit Alaska Native village in the aftermath of vicious online attacks. “One with the Whale” was produced in partnership with Vision Maker Media.

In St. Lawrence, Alaska, a remote island in the Bering Sea where hunting whales is a matter of life and death, a shy Native teen, Chris Apassingok, became the youngest person ever to harpoon a whale for his village. His family gets blindsided by thousands of keyboard activists brutally attacking him online—without fully understanding the importance of the hunt to his community's survival. “One with the Whale” chronicles the obstacles Chris and his family face, amidst larger currents of food security, environmental racism, climate change, cultural genocide, and social media. The livelihood of the Apassingoks and their village are threatened as they search for a balance between modernity and a traditional subsistence lifestyle.

“One with the Whale” will debut on PBS’s INDEPENDENT LENS on Tuesday, April 23, 2024, at 10 p.m. (check local listings). The film will be available to stream on the [PBS App](#) and will also be accessible via [PBS’s flagship YouTube channel](#) beginning on Earth Day, Monday, April 22.

“So often, marginalized communities, people of color, and Indigenous communities are attacked while carrying out subsistence traditional hunting activities,” said co-Directors Pete Chelkowski and Jim Wickens. “In sharing the Apassingok family’s story, our goal is to help people from all walks of life

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confront environmental racism through a better understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable land stewardship.”

Chelkowski and Wicken first worked together on a series investigating illegal fishing a thousand miles deep in the Pacific, and encountered children on these boats, initially presuming there could be child enslavement involved. When they realized the fishermen were fathers and sons, it became apparent that there was more to uncover about these dangerous fishing practices. Hoping to find an incident that could expose the innate racism in the environmental movement, they came across Assapingok’s story, connecting with the family via Facebook before making the long trek out to St. Lawrence Island.

The whale in question was a 200-year-old, 57-foot bowhead whale that fed the village of nearly 700 people for several months. The hunting of whales for subsistence is protected in these areas, and can only be harvested during certain times of the year due to weather conditions. Climate change has directly affected their hunting success, as the absence of ice—where most marine mammals would typically rest—makes these elusive whale hunts all the more necessary.

“‘One with the Whale’ will be a powerful catalyst for dialogue, challenging viewers to consider the delicate balance between tradition and progress, survival and sustainability,” said Lois Vossen, executive producer of INDEPENDENT LENS. “This documentary is a compelling testament to resilience, cultural heritage, and the urgent need for understanding in a rapidly changing world.”

Visit the [“One with the Whale”](#) page on INDEPENDENT LENS to learn more about the film.

About the Filmmakers

Pete Chelkowski, Co-Director

Pete Chelkowski is a producer/director. His debut feature film was “Carnival Roots” and his other works include “Life Below Zero: First Alaskans,” “Who Runs the World,” “Ocean Warriors,” “Fighting Tuna,” and “I Learn America.” He regularly works undercover for Ecostorm, an environmental detective agency. He specializes in producing the difficult and making it seem easy.

Jim Wickens, Co-Director

Jim Wickens is a leading storyteller on the frontline of environmental conflicts. His work has screened on Channel 4 News, Animal Planet, CNN, and ITV. His uncompromising style has earned him numerous awards, including the Royal Television Society (RTS) Independent Filmmaker of the Year and the Wincott Foundation Award for Journalism. This is his first feature documentary.

Yaari Walker, Producer

Yaari Walker is a spiritual healer who was born and raised in the village of Savoonga located on St. Lawrence Island. Her clan is Aymaaramka and Qiwaghmii clan. She is the Indigenous Consultant at Alaska Pacific University, assisting their transformation into a Tribal College. Previously, she ran the Unguwat Program at the Alaska Native Heritage Center.

M. Watanabe Milmore, Producer

An Emmy® Award-winning editor, she began her career in documentaries working as an assistant editor at Maysles Film. She has edited feature documentaries such as “Rebuilding Paradise” directed by Ron Howard, “Metallica: Some Kind of Monster,” “Paradise Lost: Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills,” and “Paradise Lost: Revelations” directed by Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky, and “There is Something Wrong with Aunt Diane,” directed by Liz Garbus. In addition she has edited many programs for Netflix, HBO, ABC and Sundance.

Aakapak Susan Apassingok

Born in Gambell, St. Lawrence Island, Aakapak is married to Daniel, a whaling captain, and is a proud mother to three children, Nalu, Chris, and Chase, as well as a grandma. Aakapak trained as a medical assistant in Anchorage, but now, back in Gambell, she focuses on preparing and providing for the family and relatives. With no previous film experience she has stepped up and become the boots on the ground. She trained with the OWTW team and quickly became the local producer and liaison. Aakapak has previously served as Mayor of Gambell.

Directors

Peter Chelkowski
Jim Wickens

Producers

Yaari Walker
M. Watanabe Millmore
Aakapak Apassingok

Executive Producers

Lois Vossen
Justine Nagan
Alex Lieberman
Bonni Cohen
Sivuqaq Inc
Tracy Ricard

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

INDEPENDENT LENS is an Emmy® Award-winning PBS documentary series. With founding executive producer Lois Vossen, the series has been honored with 10 Academy Award nominations and features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, INDEPENDENT LENS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Acton Family Giving, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and National Endowment for the Arts. Stream anytime on the PBS App. For more visit pbs.org/independentlens.

ABOUT ITVS

Independent Television Services (ITVS) is the largest co-producer of independent documentaries in the United States. For more than 30 years, the San Francisco nonprofit has funded and partnered with documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning titles and premieres them on our Emmy Award-winning PBS series, INDEPENDENT LENS. ITVS titles appear on PBS, WORLD, NETA, and can be streamed on various digital platforms including the PBS App. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Acton Family Giving, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Wyncote Foundation. For more information, visit itvs.org.

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