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Coastal Media Project student documentaries to screen at Santa Barbara International Film Festival

One film unpacks the news frenzy surrounding a bold sea otter and the wild waves it shares with humans. The other documents a diversity of coastal cultures and the barriers to entry they face in Southern California waters. Both were made by UC Santa Barbara students and have been included in this year's Santa Barbara International Film Festival.

Joining the star-stacked big-budget features common to the festival, now in its 39th year, the 15-minute documentaries "841" and "The Salt on Our Skin" were conceptualized, shot, edited and screened in nine weeks last summer during UCSB's Coastal Media Project (CMP) film studies course.

"The CMP course gave us the tools and skills to make a short film," said Alessandra Puig-Santana, who co-directed and co-produced "The Salt on Our Skin" to explore common threads between the annual Chumash tomol crossing to Limuw, a Black scientist scuba diver and a Latinx surf club.

The film's storylines are inspired by the crew's own personal connections to the ocean. "As students in the environmental field, we were tired of the doom-and-gloom story arc," Puig-Santana said. "We wanted to showcase the beauty and joy that people feel in the water — that was our inspiration. Our film demonstrates that community and connection to nature can heal and overcome adversity."

Screen grab of Chumash tomol paddlers from "The Salt on Our Skin"
Image

Photo Credit
Ian Kellett

Student filmmakers Alessandra Puig-Santana (left) and Tess McCormick on Santa Cruz Island

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- While “The Salt on Our Skin” takes an artful long view of spiritual connections to the ocean, “841” unfolds as a deeply researched current event, focusing on the human responses to a territorial sea otter mingling aggressively with surfers and kayakers in Santa Cruz.

“I came in heavy with the idea to make a film about sea otters and their recovery after nearly becoming extinct,” remembered the film’s director, Rachel Burnett, who’s been a big fan of the furry marine mammal since she was a kid. The idea took focus, she added, during last summer’s CMP field trip to Santa Cruz Island, where the crew met Santa Barbara-based natural history filmmaker Michael Love, who asked, “Have you heard of otter 841?”

From there, Burnett and her crew took ethics cues they’d learned in class to avoid sensationalizing the cuteness that sea otters are so often associated with. Instead, “we decided to present the information in a straightforward way and let the audience develop their own opinions,” she said. The otter story in “841” depicts the conflict between wilderness and civilization, bringing “a microcosm of our relationship with nature” into full focus.

“841” and “The Salt on Our Skin” are both part of the festival’s Santa Barbara Documentary Shorts programming, which begins at 8:40 p.m. on Feb. 13 and 5:40 p.m. on Feb. 16 at Metro 4 Theatre (618 State St). The student filmmakers will be on hand after each screening to talk about their movies and field questions from the audience.

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