UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

August 20, 2024
Keith Hamm

Coastal Media Project screens environmental documentaries at Pollock Theater

Every summer at UC Santa Barbara, small teams of young filmmakers dedicate nine rigorous weeks to conceptualize, shoot, edit and screen an original documentary. Each film draws from the theory-heavy lessons taught in the university's Department of Film and Media Studies. But in this class, the Coastal Media Project, students are also steeped in the hands-on techniques of documenting people and their challenges in our relationships to nature and culture.

The 12-credit workload is designed to expand storytelling chops through thoughtful and informed nature-based narratives along the coast. At the same time, students learn to wield — and care for — cutting-edge video and audio equipment. The class also spends several days on Santa Cruz Island, team building and learning professional filmmaking to prepare for creating films on important local coastal stories.

From 7–9 p.m. on Friday, Aug. 23, the current summer cohort's four short films will screen at the Pollock Theater. The event is free and open to the public; ticket reservations are required.

'It's bigger than the bird'

Coming in at around 12 minutes long, “Ploverize” covers the controversial topic of beach access near nesting sites of an endangered shorebird. As students began exploring potential film topics early on in the course, director Alexandria Spell heard about snowy plovers and was amazed how angry people became when telling her about these tiny, delicate shorebirds protected under federal law.

“I started thinking, ‘Why do these little birds piss people off?’” Spell said. “And then we began to realize — it’s bigger than the bird.”

Spell and her team shot b-roll and gathered interviews in Lompoc, a small city in northern Santa Barbara County, where plovers live on Surf Beach. During nesting season, between May and September, most of that beach is off limits. “People are furious about the closures,” Spell said.

As if balancing the narratives of endangered shorebirds with angry beachgoers and their dogs wasn’t enough of a challenge, the filmmakers hoped to add a humorous but respectful point of view to the contentious topic.

“Comedy can be a powerful vehicle to educate and delight people,” said Spell, who, before going back to school to study filmmaking at UCSB, worked as a nurse and a biophysicist and has been performing standup comedy for most of her adult life.

‘We recognized a disconnect’

For the film “The Kelp We Breathe,” lead editor and fourth-year film studies major Natalie Aymond said the team’s topic emerged early as they researched different coastal ecosystems native to the Santa Barbara coast. “We noticed a huge prevalence of kelp,” she said. “And we recognized a disconnect between the surface-level view of kelp as washing up on our beaches, bringing flies and a gnarly smell — as opposed to the deeper view of its dynamic beauty and as an overall support system to our coastline and its many ocean-related cultures, such as surfing, diving, art and research.”

“In the production process, my group agreed that we didn't want to miss out on experiencing and learning the skills of filming, sound and editing, so we all did everything,” she added. “Every aspect of the making of this film was truly a collaborative effort.”

‘Finding and including the voices that are often ignored’

The film “quwa'” uncovers a history of Goleta Slough and the long-overlooked significance of the Chumash island that was once there. It features interviews with well known and respected Chumash elder Ernestine Ygnacio-De Soto and Marianne Parra, a Chumash psychologist and ethnobotanist.

“The biggest challenge was finding and including the voices that are often ignored in discussions about the land's original ownership, particularly the Chumash,” said incoming senior Jonathan Coronado, head of sound design. “Our determination motivated us to seek out these voices and represent them in an honorable manner.”

‘A diverse group of fishermen, innovators and scientists’

The fourth film, “Catch-22,” explores the effort of kelp restoration, said lead editor Kylie Jasnock, a fourth-year film and media studies and geography major. It follows a diverse group of fishermen, innovators and scientists who must navigate funding, access and motivational challenges in a bid to restore the seafloor.

“Throughout the process of this film, we were constantly faced with challenges in gear management, collaborative problem-solving and inexperience with cameras,” she added. “We learned to push through to reach the finish line. We certainly learned a lot about teamwork.”

Tags
Ocean and Beaches

Media Contact
Keith Hamm
Social Sciences, Humanities & Fine Arts Writer

keithhamm@ucsb.edu

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.