

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

February 10, 2026

[Keith Hamm](#)

UCSB student documentary on California grizzlies to screen at SBIFF

When California's now-iconic bear flag was introduced in the mid-1800s, there were an estimated 10,000 grizzlies statewide. When that flag was officially adopted in 1911, grizzly bears were functionally extinct across the state. The mid-1920s marked the last credible sightings of California grizzlies in the wild. Today, there's an exploratory effort to bring them back.

A grizzly bear comeback in California is not impossible, according to UC Santa Barbara environmental historian [Peter Alagona](#), who is featured in a new documentary short film screening at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival ([SBIFF](#)).

"The Bear Beneath" covers the untold story of the extinction of California grizzlies due to overhunting and habitat loss, and the feasibility of their managed recovery at three wilderness locations, including the remote backcountry of Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.

From idea to big screen, the 12-minute film was produced by a trio of students in the Carsey-Wolf Center's 10-week intensive [GreenScreen](#) environmental filmmaking program. Fourth-year film and media studies major Olivia Hille directed the film. Jorge Rodal Llano, an exchange student from the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, served as producer. The director of photography was Los Angeles-based filmmaker Tatum Davis.

The film was inspired by Alagona, who has written two books on the subject, including "[After the Grizzly: Endangered Species and the Politics of Place in California](#)" (UC Press, 2020). "His knowledge and passion on the subject was so clear from our first crew meeting with him," Hille said. "I knew he had a story worth telling."

"Research conducted at UCSB over the last decade has rewritten the story of grizzly bears in California," Alagona said. "Among other findings, our work shows that the bears could likely be recovered in up to three California regions: the Northwest Forest near the Oregon border, the High Sierra around Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park and the Los Padres National Forest backcountry in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties."

Hille said that the knowledge and experience of Alagona, wildlife photographer and conservationist Casey Anderson and others shaped the narrative and provided a foundational launchpad for the students to dive deeper into their own research as the storyline and imagery developed.

She added that the film also benefited immensely from The California Grizzly Research Network and archival footage from the Craighead family, which splits its time between Santa Barbara and Wyoming.

As part of the festival's Santa Barbara Filmmaker Documentary Shorts category, "The Bear Beneath" will screen on Feb. 11 and 13 at the SBIFF Film Center in downtown Santa Barbara. The filmmakers will be on hand after each screening to discuss their work.

Media Contact

Keith Hamm

Social Sciences, Humanities & Fine Arts Writer

(805) 893-2191

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.