

STRANDED

by

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of the requirements for the degree

of

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in

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## ABSTRACT

This documentary and thesis paper explores the untold story of Lauren Rust and Tracy Kowalczyk, who are the only two people responsible in the state of South Carolina that respond to stranded marine mammals along the coastline. As strong advocates to combat the human impacts on marine mammals, they conduct research while educating the public.

## CHAPTER ONE

## BACKGROUND

Filmmaker Bio

Joshua Bruni is a filmmaker that focuses on wildlife conservation-based films. He is currently in the MFA in Science/ Natural History Filmmaking Program at Montana State University. Besides attending graduate school, he is also working as a photo/ video marketing professional for Casago Myrtle Beach Vacations as well as a film professor at Coastal Carolina University. His previous film “Otters of Yellowstone” was officially selected for the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival and the International Wildlife Film Festival in 2024. During these festivals, Joshua was able to educate over 1,500 students about the otters of Yellowstone National Park and the overall ecosystem. His goal was not only to make films on the conservation and preservation principles for wildlife but also to portray how we as humans share this world with animals.

Filmmaker Artist Statement

Growing up, I was drawn to watching National Geographic, Animal Planet, and The Discovery Channel. The nature and wildlife films inspired me to seek new adventures and shaped me into the videographer I am today.

Videography to me is the means of capturing a subject and expressing how I imagine it being portrayed to its full potential. Waiting hours, weeks, or even months to get a few seconds worth of footage is a passion of mine. There is nothing like the feeling of being engaged and having a close connection to a subject through the eye of the camera. Nature and wildlife have always been a key source of my happiness and joy.

With that being said, I have a passion for making wildlife conservation-based films. My goal is to not only make films based on the conservation and preservation principles of wildlife but also to portray how we as humans share this world with animals. I want to share wildlife conservation-based stories that have never been told before. Furthermore, I want my films to make a difference and have positive impacts on the conservation and preservation principles for wildlife at the local or even global level.

#### Film Logline

The Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network does research, educates, and works daily to reduce the impacts of humans on the marine mammals of South Carolina.

#### Synopsis

Lauren Rust and Tracy Kowalczyk are the only two people responsible for responding to stranded marine mammals along the entire coastline of South Carolina. They conduct a variety of research on the dolphins of South Carolina, such as boat surveys and necropsy's, to further their education and awareness to the public on the human impacts on the dolphins such as boat strikes, entanglements, and harassment.

Crew

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## CHAPTER TWO

## CONNECTION TO THE MATERIAL

In a once in a lifetime adventure in the fall of 2019, I visited Kiawah Island, SC to look for bobcats but to my surprise came upon something amazing. Little did I know that when I made my way to the south end of the island, I would witness the remarkable dolphin feeding strategy called strand feeding for the first time. I thought it was the most majestic thing I have ever seen. Between then and the summer of 2022, I visited the island as many times as I could to take pictures/ videos of these dolphins. I also recorded notes in a journal of the dolphins' behaviors and movements to further understand each of the individual dolphins to help me predict when and where they will strand feed next. I was eventually able to identify and name each of the main dolphins in the pod that routinely visit areas such as Hook, Kai, Koko, Times3, and Step, which are distinctly named by the scientific community because of their unique appearances. I felt a deeper connection and bond by getting to know each of the dolphins more over time. As I watched and filmed, I would see volunteers on the beaches educating the public about dolphins and ensuring that people do not harass them by getting too close. This sparked my interest in wanting to learn more about the Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network Organization and what they do to protect the strand feeding dolphins.

Over time, I researched the online organization, which led me to reach out to Lauren Rust with the Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network, in the summer of 2024, to pitch the idea of conducting a short documentary film based on what their non-profit organization does to help protect the marine mammals. As I was inspired by their motives to protect through the use of research, education, and awareness, I was also intrigued by the fact that Lauren Rust and Tracy

Kowalczyk are the only two people responsible for any marine mammal stranding along the coast of South Carolina. In July of 2024, I successfully pitched the idea of the short documentary to them at a Barnes and Noble in Charleston, SC. Throughout August 2024, I was able to get to learn more information about the Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network through online research while also attending their research boat surveys. Over time, Lauren Rust and Tracy Kowalczyk became more comfortable with me being involved in their research and sharing more of their personal life/ experiences. As a result, I was able to film them during every boat survey, car trip, and organizational event. Over time they were more comfortable in front of the camera, adding some authenticity to the film. This was essential for maintaining this documentary.

Throughout preproduction, I obtained written consent from each of the individuals that would be involved while obtaining permits from NOAA, due to the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, to be able to film the dolphins, film the stranding response team, and film any of the boat surveys that the Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network conducted. In the NOAA permits, they stated that “Mr. Bruni will provide draft edited footage to Lauren Rust, the MMHSRP, and the NMFS Southeast Region (Erin Fougères) for review before the final film is publicly released. This is to ensure compliance with the terms and conditions of the MMHSRP’s MMPA and ESA Permit and any additional agency policies and regulations.” This permit acquisition helped to solidify that I was to accurately portray these individuals, organization, and NOAA in a positive manner. Furthermore, I obtained a separate \$1.5mil in Certificate of Insurances through Montana State University to obtain film permits for the following locations in South Carolina: City of

Charleston, Charleston County Parks and Recreation Commission, City of Myrtle Beach, and for the South Carolina Film Commission.

Lastly, during the preproduction I witnessed a necropsy of a dolphin in a laboratory. This was utterly disturbing to view. It was brought to my attention just how significant this was to witness because it shared the result of human impacts on marine life. I have become emotionally bonded with these local dolphins throughout the last few years. To see a dolphin that died because of human impacts truly made me emotional. Going into production, I knew that I wanted the result of human impacts to be the essence of the film. I found it important to capture the gruesome visuals of dolphin deaths to expand upon the impacts of humans. However, I did not want to show too much that it would disturb the viewers, yet I wanted the visuals to have an emotional impact on the viewers. The goal was to make the viewers further understand and sympathize the significance of the human impacts on marine life in South Carolina.

## CHAPTER THREE

## HISTORY, CONTEXT, AND ARTISTIC APPROACH

Section 3.1: Research

Outdoor recreational activities such as boating, fishing, and even simply watching dolphins can be found to harm dolphins in a variety of ways. While often seeming to be harmless, outdoor recreational activities have significant impacts such as boat strikes, crab pot entanglements, and harassment on the dolphins of South Carolina. It is by educating the public that will reduce these human related impacts on dolphins.

One way to reduce harm to dolphins is to educate boaters. Boating is a common outdoor recreational activity in South Carolina. As revealed by Valerie Streif, there are more than 350,000 registered boats in the state (Streif 2024). Boaters must always remain cautious when travelling through estuaries, marshes, and tidal creeks for example because any body of water that connects to the ocean can host dolphins and other marine mammals. The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) states that boat strikes are one of the top reasons for death of the bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops erebennus*) in the state of South Carolina. The SCDNR also enforces the laws and regulations to the public to stay 50 yards away from any dolphins and 100 yards away from whales (SCDNR 2022). Unfortunately, there has been an increase in dolphins begging for food since boaters don't always heed the laws and regulations to keep their distance. Along the coastline of South Carolina, there is a limited supply of marine mammal education outreach programs (Relionbattery 2022). The Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network aims to reduce the amount of people violating the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 through educating the public and increasing awareness (Rust N.D.). The Lowcountry Marine Mammal

Network responds to around 60 marine mammal strandings every year. Just between the months of September and November of 2024, three dolphins died due to boat strikes (Deanne 2024). This demonstrates the laws and regulations that are federally mandated under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972.

Secondly, fishing is another common outdoor recreational activity in the state of South Carolina. One fishing technique that directly impacts dolphins is the use of crab pots. The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) states that besides boating, crab pot entanglements is another leading cause of dolphin deaths within the state (SCDNR 2022). The increase in demand for blue crabs both commercially and recreationally has contributed to the cost of dolphin lives within the state. In the early 2000s the state of South Carolina was recategorized as a category II fishery (Hart & Mcfee 2004). This classification describes the annual risk of mortality and injuries to the marine mammals of South Carolina and the recategorization of category II means the “annual mortality and serious injury of a stock in a given fishery is greater than 1 percent and less than 50 percent of the PBR level ( *i.e.*, occasional incidental mortality and serious injury of marine mammals)” (NOAA 2024). Furthermore, it was stated that nearly a quarter of the entanglements of the marine mammals were due to the state blue crab fishery alone (Hart & Mcfee 2004). This underscores how destructive outdoor recreational activities are on the marine mammals of South Carolina and the need to educate the public about the matter.

Lastly, the tourism industry is flourishing in the state of South Carolina. Just alone in the coastal city of Charleston, SC, from the year 2021 to 2022, the tourism increased by 21%, which was a profit of around \$12.8 billion within just one year (City Paper Staff 2023). There has also

been an increase in the population living among the coastal towns of South Carolina. Recent studies show that the increase in populations along the coast has a direct correlation to the increase in marine mammal strandings (Green et al. 2010). South Carolina is unique in that there is a localized population of dolphins that exhibit a rare feeding strategy called strand feeding. The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) understands that this unique phenomenon is spectacular to view, but they enforce people to stand back at a distance. The SCDNR states that “bottlenose dolphins are protected under federal law by the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, which makes it illegal to harass, hunt, capture or kill any marine mammal. Fines for feeding and/or harassing dolphins can reach up to \$100,000” (SCDNR 2022). This serves as a barrier to keep people back from the dolphins both on the water and on the land, however, the SCDNR agents can’t be everywhere along the coast of SC to enforce these laws and regulations. That is why education plays a key role in informing the public about the laws and regulations of being in the presence of dolphins. This is where the Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network (LMMN) bridges the gap in communication between the government and the communities of South Carolina. The LMMN consists of many volunteers who go to the common locations, in which the dolphins strand feed, to educate the visitors to stay at a distance and to not feed or harass the dolphins in any way.

In conclusion, outdoor recreational activities are the leading cause of harassment, injuries, and even death among the dolphins in South Carolina. It’s only time until the state of South Carolina becomes a category I fishery due to the exponential impacts of the outdoor recreation activities such as boating, fishing, and harassment. Unfortunately, this problem is not only local but also happening on a global scale. It is estimated that around 100,000 whales and

dolphins die each year due to human related activities (Enviroliteracy Team 2025). The Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network in South Carolina is helping in this cause by using their research to help further educate the public on this matter and bridge the gap between the government and the communities of South Carolina. The film *Stranded* aims to educate these issues to the public as well.

### Section 3.2: Connection to the Broader Field

Lauren Rust and Tracy Kowalczyk from the Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network are the only two people responsible for responding to stranded marine mammals along the entire coastline of South Carolina. They also advocate daily to combat the human impacts to marine mammals such as boat strikes, entanglements, and harassment through research, education, and awareness. Throughout the making of this short documentary, I was influenced by many films. These influences and the overall creation of this film are conventional in science and natural history filmmaking.

*Stranded* is categorized as a documentary as the events that take place are real and factual in a non-fictional manner. However, with all documentaries, there is some form of a fictional element that takes place, which can be as simple as pre-planning the compositions or shaping a visual narrative that was not shot chronologically. I was inspired by camera movements in the film *Seaspiracy* (2021) in the making of the film *Stranded*. This documentary explored the depths of human impacts on marine life, yet in an immersive manner. This was achieved through the visuals by having unsteady and shaky camera shots. For *Stranded* this style particularly was only used for the stranding response scene by not using a shoulder rig, tripod, or any kind of camera stabilization. For this scene, I really wanted the viewers to feel that they are immersed in

the reality of finding a stranded dolphin and the truth behind that humans are the main impact on the dolphins of South Carolina. In expository documentary *Seaspiracy* (2021), the impacts that humans have on marine life is expressed throughout the gore and disturbing visuals. For the film *Stranded*, I similarly showed gore and the aftermath of human impacts on the dolphins. These disturbing visuals inform the viewers just how impactful humans can be to the marine mammals.

I was influenced by blue-chip documentaries such as *Planet Earth II* (2016). Throughout each of the episodes in this series, much of the camera movements are smooth and with the use of slow-motion. This smooth slow-motion footage was achieved with the use of stabilization, which depicted the visuals to be cinematic. In *Stranded* smooth camera movements and slow-motion shots were used for the strand feeding dolphin scene in the beginning of the film. These techniques were used to portray the beauty of the dolphins and enhance the viewers' emotional connection to these dolphins. In comparison to the *Planet Earth II* series, the use of smooth motion and slow motion was used sparingly and contrasted with shots that were otherwise. This contrast in visuals is a conventional approach to the genre of science and natural history filmmaking.

The three-act structure serves as a key role in the genre of both fictional and non-fictional visual narratives. I was inspired by *Path of the Panther* (2022) for the story structure and editing of this film. As discussed in Section 3.3, the three-act structure in *Stranded* correlates directly to the film *Path of the Panther* (2022) and its traditional approach of an expositional based documentary. Regarding *Stranded*, the film as a whole was a rather conventional approach to the science and natural history filmmaking form with an organized approach and style.

### Section 3.3: Artistic Approach

For this film, I was primarily inspired by the documentary *Seaspiracy* (2021). This documentary explored the depths of human impacts on marine life yet in an immersive way. I wanted my film to be immersive and educational just like this documentary. However, I also wanted to include the beauty of the dolphins in a way that is similar to a blue-chip documentary. I wanted to do this to help the viewers become more emotionally attached to the dolphins to further understand the importance of why the LMMN is educating and making the public aware of the human impacts to marine mammals such as boat strikes, entanglements, and harassment.

In the making of this film, I used different cinematography camera movements to further immerse the viewers. For example, I used smooth camera movements and slow-motion footage to show the beauty of the strand feeding dolphins in a cinematic way that is similar to a wildlife-based blue-chip documentary. I did this to persuade the viewers to become more emotionally attached to the dolphins. Furthermore, I wanted the viewers to understand the importance of why the Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network (LMMN) is educating and making the public aware of the human impacts to the marine mammals such as boat strikes, entanglements, and harassment. I contrasted the strand feeding dolphin scene with other scenes that used a shoulder camera rig and a handheld camera. For the shoulder camera rig, it gave a natural swaying motion to the boat scenes. Meanwhile, the handheld setup made the footage look slightly shaky. I used the handheld setup and the camera shoulder rig to immerse the viewers into the visuals, add realism, and make the visual narrative seem more factual.

I also used a black mist filter to further create visual differences between scenes. I used a 1/8 black mist filter for the boat survey, which gave a slightly soft look to the details, reduced highlights, and dreamy/ vintage style to the visuals. However, the removal of the 1/8 black mist filter for the stranded response team portrayed the shots to be more realistic, dramatic, and truthful. The manipulation of light between sequences with the use and removal of a black mist filter can be found to be experimental as I explored its uses of shaping the viewer's emotions and feelings throughout the making of this short documentary.

As for the editing, I was inspired by the documentary film *Path of the Panther* (2022) to create the three-act structure. This film had a strong hook in the beginning of the film showing a dead panther that was hit by a car. Similarly, I used a scene from the stranding response of a dead dolphin to serve as a hook in the beginning of the film. The climax of the *Path of the Panther* (2022) was the part of the story where the female panther that crossed the river became a mother. The shots in the beginning of the film of the dead panther and the shots of the mother panther and kittens were taken at night. The night shots added a sense of realism, drama, and emotions to the story that further inspired me for the color grading of my own film. Regarding the color grading in my film, the saturation, white balance, and exposure for each of the scenes played a key role in informing the viewers. For the stranding response scenes, the saturation was lowered, white balance was cooled, and the shots were underexposed. I did this to convey sadness, negativity, add realism, and make the visuals more dramatic. This color grade adds realism because it mimics real-world lighting, and the colors are not overly stylized. Also, the cooled white balance will make the viewers feel less comfortable than a warm white balance (Kroll N.D.). Controversially the epic montage of strand feeding dolphins and other scenes throughout

the film are vibrant, properly exposed, and contain a warm white balance. The warm white balance was used to convey the warmth setting of South Carolina, the love and compassion of the characters to the dolphins, and positivity. The proper exposure and vibrant saturation was used to make the visuals more visually appealing, add energy, and most importantly creates a visual contrast to the stranding response scenes. Furthermore, the warm colors used can be related to strong emotions such as love and passion (Pixflow 2025).

## CHAPTER FOUR

## DISSEMINATION

Section 4.1: Financial Information

Table 1. Production Budget

<b>Production Title: Stranded</b>					
<b>Production Days:</b>					
<b>Director: Joshua Bruni</b>					
<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Rate</b>	<b>Days</b>	<b>Notes</b>	<b>Total</b>
Pre-Prod.	Gas	\$33.00	6	Day Rate	\$198.00
<b>Total Pre-Production</b>					<b>\$198.00</b>
Production	Gas	\$33.00	11	Day Rate	\$363.00
Production	Hotel	\$120.00	1	Flat	\$120.00
Production	Food/ Drinks	\$10.00	11	Day Rate	\$110.00
<b>Total Production</b>					<b>\$593.00</b>
Post-Prod.	Music/ SFX	\$300	1	In Kind	\$300.00
<b>Total Post-Production</b>					<b>\$300.00</b>
Distribution	Theater Screening	\$1,000.00	1	In Kind	\$1,000.00
Distribution	Festival Fees	\$750.00	n/a	Allow	\$750.00
<b>Total Distribution</b>					<b>\$1,750.00</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>					<b>\$2,841.00</b>

Section 4.2: Distribution

As for outreach, the film *Stranded* is now live on imdb.com to allow anyone to access information regarding the film, increase visibility, allow for ratings/ reviews, and to further the progression of the film to the industry. There was also a recent article written by the Charleston Daily about the film that included the logline, backstory, narrative, details of cast/ crew, and the distribution details.

The film *Stranded* will be making its first debut on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, at the Coastal Carolina University (CCU) Film Festival, which is located in Conway, SC. This is a new film

festival that is right now only open to students and alumni of the university within the last three years. I am currently a film professor at CCU, and I was given permission to screen my film at the closure of the student film festival screening. I will also be making my own students attend the film festival and analyze the film for extra credit in their film course.

The next public screening will be at the Terrace Theater, which is located in Charleston, SC. This screening will be held on May 15<sup>th</sup> from 6-8pm. The Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network is helping me host this screening. The theater contains approximately 155 seats. The Lowcountry Marine Mammal Network will be covering the up-front cost of \$1,000 to reserve the space and will be making reservations of \$15 per ticket via Eventbrite. Following the screening there will be a Q&A session.

I also plan to submit to many film festivals such as Jackson Wild Film Festival, International Wildlife Film Festival, Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, International Ocean Film Tour Film Festival, Wild & Scenic Film Festival, NextLens Film Festival, Wildlife Conservation Film Festival, and many more throughout 2025-2026. The main film festival I would like for this film to get into is the Jackson Wild Film Festival. This film festival in particular is found to be prestigious in the world of wildlife filmmaking. To further increase the chances of my film to get into this film festival and other film festivals, I plan to keep the film duration less than 22 minutes in length as a short film, and to submit the film as a student filmmaker. The main reason for this is because films over the duration of 22 minutes in length are considered long form and many big production companies submit into that category at Jackson Wild Film Festival. Furthermore, I may increase my odds of being an official selection for any film festival by submitting as a student. My goal is to submit to as many wildlife and

ocean-based film festivals around the world to further share this impactful story. Furthermore, I would like to attend as many of these film festivals as I can to network and be involved in the Q&A sessions.

After maybe a year of a film festival run, I plan to distribute the film to Amazon Prime Video Direct. I do not plan on making money and plan to have this film as free to access via Amazon Prime. There are other outlets as well I plan to distribute to such as Tubi and South Carolina ETV (SCETV). The SCETV is the public broadcasting station of South Carolina. The film can be shared on SCETV after being accepted as an official selection into the NextLens Film Festival.

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