

# Wyland: A Force for Nature

BY CORDELIA NORRIS AND GEORGE CLARKE, PHOTOS BY THE WYLAND FOUNDATION

Called a "Marine Michelangelo" by USA Today, Wyland has been enthralled by whales since he saw a duo of mother and calf gray whales spouting off the Pacific coast. A Detroit native, Wyland first visited the ocean at age 14, and the wonder and awe of that initial encounter has inspired a lifetime creating marine art and working toward marine conservation and education initiatives.

While best known for his iconic Whaling Walls, he works in many mediums, including oils, acrylics, bronze, and watercolor. He favors a highly representational style, but even his more abstract work is driven by his love of the ocean.

Wyland created his first Whaling Wall (the large-scale murals which would propel him to international renown) in 1981 on the 130-foot-long facade of the Hotel Laguna in Laguna Beach. At the time, on his 25th birthday, Wyland never considered creating more than one mural. Afraid of heights, it was both a physical and mental challenge to create this monumental mural. While working on his first murals in California, he noted the way students reacted; and realized that the grand scale of the murals would allow him to share the wonder of the ocean with a broader audience. Wyland has since completed 100 Whaling Walls around the U.S. and in 11 other countries. Seen by millions, these large-scale works are a powerful way to inspire a love of the ocean and communicate the urgent need to protect marine mammals globally.

Wyland has long understood the power of art to educate, inspire, and create change. He established the Wyland Foundation in 1993, which has been his vehicle for promoting this mission. Wyland cites it as, "one of my proudest legacies... The foundation's message is to learn everything we can about our environment and use art to educate and inspire people to get involved."

Nearly two decades later, the Foundation inspires people everywhere and has a solid following in the Port City with like-minded residents and local business owners who share Wyland's passion for ocean conservation and protecting marine life. One such business owner is Wrightsville Beach resident, Mark Bloomquist, founder of Blue Shark Vodka. A life-long diver who's love for the ocean and environmental stewardship prompted his partnership with the conservation artist, Bloomquist said, "We can't think of a better artist and foundation to showcase and support."

Blue Shark Vodka's limited edition bottles featuring Wyland's art quickly sold out in ABC stores across North Carolina when they debuted for Independence Day celebrations in 2020. The special edition 750 ml bottles featured an original oil painting on the back label of a stunning Blue Shark,



Wyland holds a Blue Shark Vodka bottle up to a painting in progress for the limited edition Blue Shark Vodka bottle, released in 2020, with portions of proceeds supporting the Foundation.

swimming peacefully over a shipwreck. A portion of the proceeds from each bottle sold benefited the Wyland Foundation.

Longtime collaborator and vice president of the Foundation, Steve Creech notes, "The foundation enjoys our collaboration with the Bloomquist family and Blue Shark Vodka." This partnership not only has helped raise funds for Wyland's Foundation, but also expanded awareness of the vodka brand's message thanks to Wyland's positive influence in the ocean conservation sphere.

"In the 2000s, we started looking around at what was going on around the country, like the hypoxic dead zones [in the ocean], which are the result of what's happening upstream," Creech explained. "We asked ourselves, 'What are we doing if we can't change attitudes upstream?'" To help answer that difficult question, The Foundation developed one of its signature programs, the innovative Wyland Mobile Learning Exhibit. This biodiesel-powered, STEM-focused exhibit travels around North America, providing insight into the earth's water systems for fifth and sixth graders.

Recently upgraded, this traveling 1,000-square-foot mini-museum includes six interactive stations and a 40-person theater. Wyland explains



A mini-museum on wheels, The Wyland Foundation's Mobile Learning Experience brings hands-on education about water systems to approximately 15,000 elementary students across North America every year.



*We wish to thank Blue Shark Vodka for sponsoring monthly articles on The Big Blue.*

that the exhibit is designed primarily for, “kids [who] quite frankly don’t have much access to environmental science or schools that are suffering under budget cuts for science.” These underserved communities are the ones most often at risk from environmental degradation. Community water systems in such areas have a higher likelihood of sub-standard drinking water, affected by such contaminants as lead, nitrates, and arsenic.

The exhibit empowers students to understand the water systems in their community and help them become vectors for change. The Foundation typically covers half of the cost of the visit and can provide up to 100% assistance, depending on the needs of the participating schools.

The Foundation contends that its programs, “have shown measurable results in promoting a broader understanding of the way human activities affect the health of our coasts and waterways and the overall quality and availability of our water supplies.” With the aid of a virtual reality immersive setting, and 4K graphics on 80” screens, students imagine that they’re visitors from another planet on a field trip to Earth, learning about the planet’s water systems and helping the humans conserve this precious resource. Creech explains, “the idea is to help change their perspective... and have strategies for pollution management.”

Over the course of a year, 15,000 students experience this mobile museum and learn about the future of water and what they can do to improve its quality and availability, with a focus that goes from local runoff to the Earth’s aquasphere. From its inception in 1998, over a million children have used it. After touring the mobile museum, students are given tools that they can use for at-home projects, such as clean-ups and waste reports.

Wyland’s art and influence can be seen and felt locally in several locations. In 1993, the artist painted his 48th Whaling Wall along the Downtown Riverwalk, on the river-facing wall of the Coast Line Inn. The mural overlooks the Cape Fear River and is best seen from the water. While

nearly 30 years of sun, wind, and rain have faded its original intensity, it portrays multiple life-size dolphins and a sea turtle in the foreground, cavorting in a sunlit sea overlooking the Carolina coast.

The Gallery of Fine Art in Mayfaire exhibits an array of marine life artwork including stunning bronze sculptures by Wyland. Mike Golonka displays Wyland’s work along with books about “The Art and Life of Wyland” in his gallery located next to Belk.

And Panamanian-inspired Ceviche’s restaurant on Wrightsville Avenue is an ocean-friendly business that contributes a portion of sales to The Wyland Foundation. Owner Laura Tiblier created “Laura’s Lemonade,” a recipe using the local vodka brand with \$1 from the sale of each drink donated to Wyland’s foundation. When Laura and her husband Gunther created their bar program, she said, “our idea was to create one drink that would give back... Blue Shark Vodka was included because of its similar mission to raise awareness around clean oceans and shark preservation, in addition to being a locally-made product.” The cocktail is still on the menu.



Wyland with the limited-edition bottle of Blue Shark Vodka, which won the prestigious SIP Double Gold Design Award for package design in 2021.

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