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Catrin Wendt on sea anemones, going viral, and effective sci-comm

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Catrin Wendt at her field site in the Prince William Sound in Cordova, Alaska.

When T.A. Catrin Wendt encouraged undergraduate students in a marine biology course to take photos and videos of a demonstration in her lab, she didn't expe one of the videos to go viral — let alone change perceptions of a Pacific Northwest sea creature.

But then, one particularly captivating video of a sea anemone received roughly 31,000 up-votes on Reddit in just 24 hours. "I've posted things to Reddit before and the reaction has never been like that," she says. Catrin credits her student Jordan Checketts, who created and posted the video, for the social media prowess and videography skills which contributed to the viral nature of the demo.

Catrin, a master's student in Aquatics and Fishery sciences, taught a lesson illustrating the reaction of a sea anemone to a

predatory sea star. The demonstration was developed and performed for undergraduate students in the lab by Professor Greg Jensen.

In the demo, the sea anemone is "approached" by a sea star, and the iridescent, orange creature collapses its tendrils, breaks free of the rock it is sitting on, and propels itself to the other side of the tank using a slow, wiggling motion.

"The sea anemone is swimming blindly because it doesn't have eyes," Catrin says. "It's just hoping whatever it runs into is better than the sea star."

This particular sea anemone, a local species, is one of three that flees when confronted by a predator.

The demonstration breaks the common misconception that all creatures in the taxonomic family that includes sea anemones, coral and jellyfish (known as *Cnidaria*) never swim or shift positions.

"The purpose of the demo is to show the different approaches that this taxonomic grouping can take to the surrounding environment," Catrin says.

On Reddit the demonstration has garnered 800 comments, and Catrin has been encouraged by the observations people have been posting.

"Several commenters said they thought sea anemones were plants, so I think this broke a lot of misconceptions people had," Catrin said. "That was very gratifying to me."

Some commenters drew comparisons between the sea anemone and the drag queen RuPaul, host and creator of RuPaul's Drag Race, who tells contestants to "sashay away" — not unlike the swaying motion of the sea anemone.
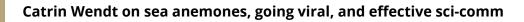
In this way, commenters were "humanizing the sea anemone, and creating an emotional bond with the animal," Catrin says. This is not an insignificant component of scientific outreach.

"The closer an animal is to something we identify with, the more we want to protect it," Catrin says. So, correcting these misconceptions — like the false notion that sea anemones are plants, not animals — is critical to preserving wildlife.

For Catrin, who has been invested in scientific communication since her undergraduate career, the viral response to this video has made her think differently about how she does sci-comm.

"I use Twitter, and I use a blog, but I never thought about trying Reddit for science outreach," she says. "After this, I think it's something I'll keep trying."

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