

A viral sensation: hungry sea urchins keep Campbell River observatory clean

Submitted by Katie Shoemaker Fri, 2018-02-02 09:20

When Ocean Networks Canada's (ONC) marine operations team hauled out the Campbell River community observatory for its annual maintenance, they were in for a surprise. A herd of sea urchins had made the platform their home and were earning their keep by feeding on the marine debris that normally accumulates on underwater infrastructure, aka biofouling.

Recovered instrument platform, still clean after a year at 8 m depth thanks to a swarm of hungry sea urchins [#biofouling @Ocean_Networks pic.twitter.com/y7sml5dVim](#)

? Paul Macoun (@PaulMacoun) [January 30, 2018](#)

ONC's field services manager Paul Macoun [tweeted a photo](#) and it's gone viral, finding an audience with both the ocean tech community, and Star Trek fans. Sea urchins bear an uncanny resemblance to tribbles, the cute fuzzy balls that ran amok on the Starship Enterprise in a memorable 1960's episode called [?The Trouble with Tribbles?](#) (*Figure 1*).



Figure 1. Star Trek's 'The Trouble with Tribbles' was first broadcast in the United States on December 29, 1967.

Meanwhile, the Campbell River platform will spend the next two weeks being maintained and upgraded at ONC's Marine Technology Centre in Sidney (*Figure 2*). A new hydrophone will be added to monitor underwater sounds such as whales, boats, and possibly sea urchins feeding on marine debris. In addition to a new conductivity-temperature-depth sensor and fluorometer (which measures chlorophyll), a new camera will provide higher resolution images of the rocky turbulent seabed in Discovery Passage. 'To protect the camera lens from the urchins' sharp 'scrapers', a protective guard will be rigged to the camera,' says Paul Macoun. 'Something similar to a dog's cone of shame.' If you're wondering what happened to the sea urchins, they were all returned safely to the ocean.



Figure 2. The Campbell River community observatory platform awaits its annual maintenance and upgrades at the Marine Technology Centre in Sidney.

The Campbell River community observatory will be back in the water and delivering real-time ocean data in time for Valentine's Day.

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