

Crowdsourcing science: Researcher uses Facebook to identify thousands of fish

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Facebook is well-known for connecting friends, publicizing events and allowing people ample space to procrastinate online.

But recently, a scientist at the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) helped illuminate a powerful new use for the [social networking](#) tool.

In January, UTSC PhD candidate Devin Bloom helped conduct the first ichthyological survey on Guyana's remote Cuyuni River. Led by Oregon State University's Dr. Brian Sidlauskas, the goal was to find out which species of fish live in the Cuyuni and get a good estimate of their abundance.

During the survey, Bloom and the rest of the research team spent two weeks catching as many fish as they could. They even slept in makeshift [jungle](#) camps. But after collecting more than 5,000 specimens, the team had a big problem.

In order to get the fish out of the country, the research team needed an accurate count of each species and provide a detailed report to the Guyanese government. Since the team had to return to North America as soon as possible, they had just a few days to identify thousands of [fish](#) specimens.

That's when Bloom, who isn't exactly the most tech-savvy guy out there, suggested Facebook. Sidlauskas loved the idea, so he uploaded photos of

each species. And in less than 24 hours, their network of friends—many of whom hold PhDs in ichthyology and are "diehard fish-heads"—had identified almost every specimen. With 5,000 identifications in hand, the team was able to deliver their results to the government and return home on schedule.

The team's novel use of Facebook to accurately crowdsource scientific data could change the way academics view social networking. It has certainly led Bloom to change his mind about the value of online tools. "Social networking is so powerful," he says, "and scientists should be using it more to connect with the world-at-large."

Provided by University of Toronto Scarborough

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