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Discovery Channel Canada Highlights Research at USF St. Petersburg

(St. Petersburg, Fla.) March 3, 2008 - Prof. Deby Cassill’s eyes lit up as television producer Alix McDonald asked her questions about the emotions of fire ants, a topic Prof. Cassill has researched with the help of USF St. Petersburg students.

The biology professor sat under a square, bright light as McDonald interviewed her Friday, Feb. 29, for a television program on Discover Channel Canada that features recent scientific findings and is broadcast internationally.

“They’ve given me a window into understanding social behavior,” Prof. Cassill explained. “More than any other organism ever has.”

Her research has shown how some fire ants love to fight, but different ants in a colony will have one role and almost always stick to it – be it a fighter, a nurturer or a worker. Ants have personalities, moods and receptors for hormones that produce emotions just as humans do.

“The difference is we are able to rationalize our emotions,” Prof. Cassill said.

She also explained a certain fire ant behavior her students helped her discover – young ants will play dead to avoid being attacked by larger, more powerful ants. The feature on Prof. Cassill’s work will air on Daily Planet, a one-hour program on Discovery Channel Canada which shows news and features focused on science.

McDonald also spent a day with Prof. Eric Steimle, learning about a surface vehicle able to navigate in water to assess structural damages after a major disaster.

“He’s the reason we came back here,” McDonald said.

The show had previously featured Steimle in a program in 2007 with a story about a surface vehicle designed to monitor seagrass damage from boat propellers.

Both Prof. Cassill and Prof. Steimle are a part of the Environmental Science Policy and Geography program at USF St. Petersburg. Visit the program’s Web site for more information.

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