

Study: Tasmanian Devil may face extinction

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A rare cancer is reportedly decimating Australia's dwindling Tasmanian Devil population, ABC News reported Thursday.

The cancer, called Devil Facial Tumor Disease, causes contagious facial tumors and scientists estimate up to half the animals in the wild have been killed.

Although initially detected in the middle 1990s, the seriousness of the disease was not fully known until 2003 -- after killing an estimated 75,000 of the marsupials, ABC said.

The disease affects the animals' mouths and many die of starvation.

"This is a very, very serious disease," veterinarian and wildlife researcher David Obendorf told Australian TV. "We may well see the devil become extinct in the wild."

Originally regarded as a pest by residents of the Australian state of Tasmania, farmers have come to appreciate the Devils, ABC noted, because they keep the mice population in check and even consume dead animal carcasses, which helps prevent the spread of disease.

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