

Tasmanian devils face extinction

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Australian scientists say the ongoing fight to save Tasmanian devils from extinction may be doomed.

Researchers have been battling to find a cure for a deadly facial tumor disease that has decimated the numbers of the rare animals -- found only in Australia's island state of Tasmania.

But now scientists at Sydney University have suggested a lack of genetic diversity because of inbreeding will doom the devils in any case.

Geneticist Kathy Belov, leader of the university scientific team, told the Australian Broadcasting Corp. the devils had been found to have "very low levels of genetic diversity in really key immune genes."

"What this means is that they are going to be susceptible, not only to this horrible cancer that is decimating them at the moment, but potentially to all sorts of other diseases, because they simply don't have the genetic diversity in their genes, which will enable them to respond to any new diseases that are thrown at them," she said.

A deadly facial cancer already has killed half of the devil population because the animals have no resistance to the disease which they catch from biting each other -- fighting over food or mates at breeding time.

Belov said even though scientists hoped to save the Tasmanian devil from extinction through breeding a captive "insurance" population, it would be hard to protect them from any epidemic in the future.

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