Scientists try to save the Tasmanian devil

January 29 2008

U.S. scientists are racing to save the Tasmanian devil from extinction from a unique, transmissible and rapidly spreading cancer.

The process by which the cancer spreads -- physical contact -- has only been seen once before and represents a new field in cancer biology. Once an animal is afflicted, tumors appear on its face and neck, restricting the ability to eat. Within approximately three months, the devils succumb to the disease, often through starvation. Officials project that within 20 years the species could become extinct.

Researchers at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, led by native Tasmanian Elizabeth Murchison, are attempting to determine how the tumors work at a molecular level.

"Once the cancer genes are fully sequenced, we will have a better chance to identify the cause and genetic makeup of this unique cancer," said Murchison.

The uniqueness of the tumor structure also has human implications.

"We're using all of the research tools employed for understanding human tumor biology," said Gregory Hannon, a Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator who oversees Murchison's work. "A cure for the devil may have applications for humans as well."

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Citation: Scientists try to save the Tasmanian devil (2008, January 29) retrieved 26 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2008-01-scientists-tasmanian-devil.html

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