

# Tasmanian devils listed as endangered in Australia

May 22 2009, By ROD McGUIRK , Associated Press Writer

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FILE - In this Oct. 17, 2008 file photo, Tex a Tasmanian Devil reacts in his enclosure at Sydney's Taronga Zoo. The Tasmanian devil, a snarling fox-sized marsupial made notorious by its Looney Tunes cartoon namesake Taz, was listed as an endangered species Friday, May 22, 2009 because of a contagious cancer that has wiped out most of the wild population. (AP Photo/Mark Baker, File)

(AP) -- The Tasmanian devil, a snarling fox-sized marsupial made notorious by its Looney Tunes cartoon namesake Taz, was listed in Australia as an endangered species Friday because of a contagious cancer that has wiped out most of the wild population.

The upgrade from "vulnerable" under Australian environmental law entitles the world's largest marsupial carnivore to greater protection in the island state of Tasmania, Environment Minister Peter Garrett said in

a statement.

Devils do not exist in the wild outside Tasmania, although mainland zoos are breeding captive populations as a strategy against total extinction.

Their numbers have declined by 70 percent since the facial cancer was first reported in 1996. The disease is caused by bites inflicted on each other's faces as part of a bizarre [mating](#) ritual or while squabbling over food. It causes grotesque facial tumors that eventually prevent them from feeding, leading to starvation within months.

"Strong action is being taken to find out more about this disease and to stop its spread," Garrett said.

The government has already committed 10 million Australian dollars (\$7.8 million) over five years to research the disease and support captive breeding programs, but scientists say more is needed.

Hamish McCallum, senior scientist in the government-backed devil rescue program, said the main advantage of the endangered listing was that it acknowledged the serious threat the species faced.

"I'm hoping that it might cause a philanthropist or corporate sponsors to say: 'Hey, this is serious' and to chip in some serious money," McCallum said.

"I guess my optimism has diminished a little bit, but I'm still hopeful that of the various angles we're looking at, one of them will come through and we won't lose the animals in the wild," he added.

Warner Bros., which owns Taz, and CNN founder Ted Turner, who started the Cartoon Network, have helped fund the fight against the disease.

McCallum fears that devils could be extinct in the wild in 20 years. He estimates there are as few as 10,000 now, as the cancer continues to spread west and south across Tasmania.

Scientists have been working since the disease first emerged to save the animals, known for their powerful jaws and bloodcurdling growl.

Programs to try to save them include plans to relocate breeding pairs to island sanctuaries and to protect disease-free populations on peninsulas with devil-proof fences several miles (kilometers) long.

McCallum said he is frustrated that disagreement among scientists has prevented the sanctuaries from being established on islands off Tasmania. Some scientists fear the introduced devils would threaten endangered birds.

Scientists had hoped to find a genetic solution to the disease through a young devil who showed signs of natural immunity in laboratory tests. But that devil last year contracted a second, mutated strain of the cancer.

A test that can potentially detect the disease in a devil before it becomes contagious is in trials. While scientists hope this will help keep small wild populations disease free, the test is not yet proven to be accurate.

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