

Australia moving cancer-hit Tasmanian Devils to new islands

January 21 2010, by Talek Harris



A female Tasmanian Devil is seen at Mole Creek Wildlife Reserve in Tasmania. Starting this year, Australia will ship healthy Devils -- known for their fearsome shrieks and wild temperament -- to islands off Tasmania to create a back-up group in case the general population fails due to a hideous face cancer.

Australia is taking the bold step of moving Tasmanian Devils to new islands in a desperate bid to save the iconic species from being wiped out by a hideous face cancer.

Starting this year, [Australia](#) will ship healthy Devils -- known for their fearsome shrieks and wild temperament -- to islands off Tasmania to create a back-up group in case the general population fails.

Some 70 percent of Devils have already been lost to the infectious

disease, which is spread by biting as the feisty creatures mate and fight over animal carcasses.

"It's 100 percent fatal. If you get it, you die," said Mark Williams, a spokesman for Sydney's Taronga Zoo.

"The face bursts into lesions, they can't feed so they starve to death in agony. It's a terrible illness."

Experts have been gathering healthy Devils and breeding them in zoos for the past six years, developing an "insurance population" of 220. But the species was declared endangered last May, raising pressure for a more drastic approach.

Save the [Tasmanian Devil](#) Program manager Andrew Sharman said experts had weighed up the risks of disturbing fragile island ecosystems with the animals, Australia's largest meat-eating marsupial.

He said the programme was studying Maria Island off Tasmania, as well as setting up "virtual islands" by fencing off areas untouched by the disease.

"There's any number of examples around the world about island introductions that have gone wrong," Sharman said.

"We're being really careful, considered and cautious about how we introduce devils to islands. We have to look at what impacts the introduction we have on that island's [fauna](#)."

The islands project is due to take shape in the coming months, marking a major step forward in the project to save the Devils and appeasing critics who had said the conservation campaign was moving too slowly.

"There's always going to be some risk involved in putting Devils on an island, but it's a case of the Devils or the island," said Peter McGlone of the Tasmanian Conservation Trust.

The Devil is Tasmania's top predator, meaning it plays a key role on its native island but could wreak havoc with different ecosystems.

"It's vital that we save them not just because they're an iconic animal but because they're top of the tree in Tasmania, they're the primary carnivore," said Tony Britt-Lewis, senior keeper at Taronga Zoo.

"There might be foxes in Tasmania and devils can play a role in controlling fox populations, cleaning up the paddocks and sick animals or whatever. They're the lion of Tasmania, that's why it's so important that we save them."

Scientists recently cracked the cancer's genetic code, raising hopes of a diagnostic test and an eventual cure.

"It's an iconic animal and it could go in our lifetime. It could go in 20 years unless there's a breakthrough," Williams said.

The Devils first came to prominence when their unearthly shrieks and grunts while devouring corpses of dead animals terrified Western settlers arriving in Tasmania in the 19th century.

"These newcomers ... lying in their tents at night, listened nervously to the beast's alien shrieks and screams emanating from densely wooded mountains and valleys," wrote David Owen and David Pemberton in their book, "Tasmanian Devil, a unique and threatened animal".

Some 150 years later, the Devil is best known by the wild "Taz" Warner Brothers cartoon character that now fronts the conservation campaign.

But according to experts, the Devils hardly deserve their formidable reputation.

"They're not really an overtly aggressive animal. They're very shy and nervous and they'd much rather hide in their den than come out and attack you," said zoo keeper Britt-Lewis, despite nursing a bleeding thumb.

"I can understand how they got that name from our early settlers 150 years ago but they really don't deserve it. They've all got different personalities, they're a great animal.

"They're not really a crazy, nasty animal like Taz the cartoon character."

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