

Devils on Maria Island



Parks and Wildlife Service Tasmania

DEPARTMENT of TOURISM, PARKS
HERITAGE and the ARTS

Why have devils on Maria Island?

Devils do not naturally occur on any of our off-shore islands so Maria Island has never had a devil population before. This makes Maria Island one of the safest places for devils in Tasmania as it removes one possible source of the fatal, facial tumour disease afflicting devils over much of the State. Tasmanian devils have been brought to Maria Island as part of a captive, off-display, quarantine population. These animals are part of a vital insurance population, which might be essential to the Tasmanian devil's future survival. They must be kept under strict quarantine in secure enclosures, away from any public viewing because we are still uncertain how the disease is transmitted.

Why have an insurance population?

Devil Facial Tumour Disease is a fatal disease that has already killed up to half of the Tasmanian devil population. The disease appears to be widespread in the north, east and south of the State. It has been identified as far west as Cradle Mountain in the north and Lonnvale in the south.

Once the disease reaches a devil population it appears to affect all the adult devils, killing most within just a few months of the tumours becoming obvious. This is often before females can raise a litter to



full independence. At present we still have limited information on this unique disease. We do not yet have a diagnostic test to identify all animals with the disease or even know how it is transmitted. It is vital that we establish insurance populations of apparently healthy young devils from apparently disease-free areas, as soon as possible. This is just one of the precautionary measures the Devil Response Team is implementing to try to save devils from this disease. The aim of an insurance population such as this one on Maria Island is to establish genetically diverse, healthy captive devil populations as a backup against possible extinction in the wild.

East and West Coast populations

There appear to be two genetically distinct devil populations: those in the east which reaches as far west as Narawntapu National Park and those in the far west in areas such as Woolnorth, Granville Harbour and Strahan. It is likely natural landscape barriers have prevented breeding between these two populations so that, over time, they have become quite genetically distinct.

Most of the animals held in captivity in various wildlife parks and zoos are eastern animals. Although all are healthy, their genetic diversity is low. The Devil Response Team has identified a need to establish two new insurance populations of devils – one from the east and one from the West Coast.



These can be sent to selected mainland zoos once they have undergone quarantine in Tasmania for at least 12 months. A vital part of this quarantine is that animals are kept in a disease-free area and that no other devils live in that area. As the disease does not appear to be on the West Coast it is vital that eastern animals stay on the eastern side of Tasmania. Maria Island is one of the few places in Tasmania that doesn't have devils and is disease free and so fits the criteria for the eastern insurance population.

Obtaining disease-free devils

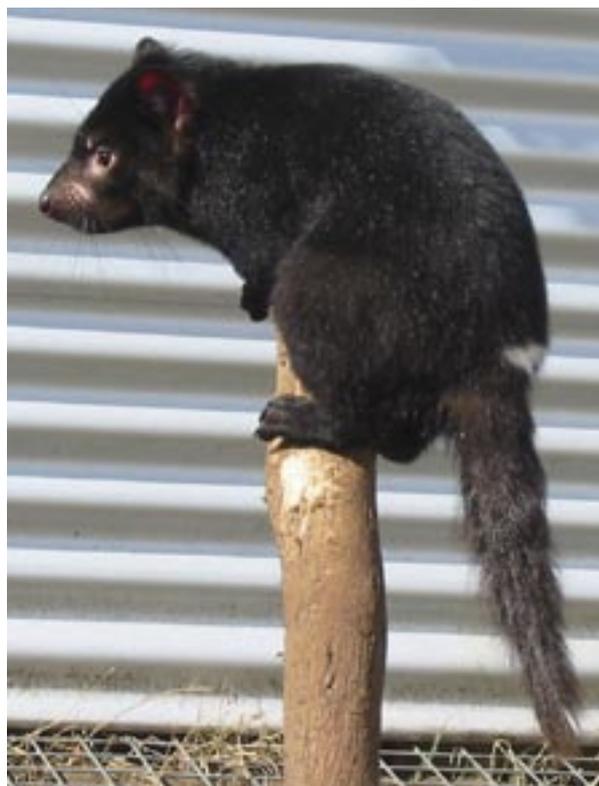
It is believed the disease is contagious so devils could only be collected from areas where there is no record of the disease. Narawntapu National Park and Southport were believed to be the best places from which to obtain disease-free eastern animals. Extensive trapping programs were carried out in these areas to ensure the population had no signs of the disease. To be classified disease-free at least 90 individual animals must be captured, all with no sign of the disease. Several locations were trapped to obtain the West Coast insurance population with maximum genetic diversity.

As the disease has not yet been identified in juvenile devils it was decided that only young, newly independent animals should be captured from the wild for the insurance populations. These animals are unlikely to have had much contact with adult animals that may have moved in from nearby diseased areas. The Nature Conservation Branch of the Department of Primary Industries, Water and Environment has established a partnership with the Australasian Regional Association of Zoological Parks and Aquaria to assist in managing devils as part of a National Species Program.

Maria Island National Park is now home to nine female devils

Nine young females were caught in February and March 2005 to establish the eastern insurance population. Three males were also caught but these are being held elsewhere so that there is no risk of a breeding population establishing in the wild on Maria Island. Seven females have come from the northeast, around Narawntapu National Park and two from the Southport/Hastings area in the south. All nine arrived on Maria Island on 13th May 2005.

To prevent any potential disease spread they are separated according to capture location into four enclosures. Parks staff must follow rigid quarantine and husbandry procedures to ensure no contamination occurs between enclosures, in case one group turns out to be incubating the disease. All food, nesting and climbing material must be from disease-free areas and all waste products have to be chemically treated. Caring for the devils is laborious but their future depends on procedures being meticulously followed.



To keep the devils healthy they are kept quarantined and no visitors are allowed. However it is planned that some interpretation of the animals will be set up in the Commissariat Store so that people can find out more about them. For further information on the devil disease contact the Nature Conservation Branch on 6233 6556.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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