

Tasmanian Devils at home in Orange's Earth Sanctuary

EARTH FIRST

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Once an important carnivore on mainland Australia, the iconic Tasmanian Devil is currently facing its greatest challenge yet – to survive a deadly tumour disease that is decimating wild populations. The contagious 'Devil Facial Tumour Disease' as it is known, was first identified in Tasmania over a decade ago, and it is thought that the cancerous tumour is spread when individuals fight.

Devil Facial Tumour Disease

The disease causes grotesque facial tumours that grow over the marsupial's mouth and face, preventing them from eating leading to starvation and death within months. Researchers have recently estimated that over half of Tasmania's devil population have been wiped out by the disease. This has prompted the Tasmanian Government to list the species as 'endangered', and to fund critical scientific research.

As the disease spreads through wild populations in Tasmania, scientists are urgently searching for a cure, and have predicted disease-free populations could be a thing of the past in 5 years time. However, both State and Federal Governments have stepped up to address the problem, and have invested over \$20 million in funding to save the species.

One initiative, the 'Save the Tasmanian Devil Program' is establishing disease-free captive populations in zoos and wildlife parks on the mainland of Australia. This Program will provide an insurance policy, raising animals that could become an important part of future reintroduction programs. Researchers are confident that the species can be saved, but their survival is reliant of establishing viable breeding populations that are disease-free and exhibit genetic diversity.

Dubbo's Western Plain Zoo

As part of the Program, Dubbo's Taronga Western Plains Zoo is lending a hand to save the species. They are spear-heading a major program to establish a disease-free captive bred population of Tassie Devils. In recent months, the Zoo has reported five new joeys have been born, and is looking to continue breeding efforts. The Program is also looking for ways to expand, and this could involve the introduction of Tassie Devils to secure fenced areas and wildlife sanctuaries elsewhere in the central west.

Orange's Earth Sanctuary

Located adjacent to Lake Canobolas, Orange's Earth Sanctuary could become the new home for many of Dubbo's captive bred Tassie Devils – helping to ensure the species survival for future generations. The Earth Sanctuary is an ideal location and is surrounded by an electrified reinforced predator-proof fence to exclude feral cats and introduced foxes. It is hoped that the Earth Sanctuary could also become home to other threatened and vulnerable species, such as bandicoots, bettongs and endangered wallabies. If supported, the Orange's Earth Sanctuary could become a major asset to Orange, and contribute to important conservation and education programs for the District. The Earth Sanctuary presents a great opportunity to raise awareness of the iconic native marsupial and help in securing the future of Tasmanian Devils. It could also help to make the Lake Canobolas district become Orange's greatest eco-tourism destination, providing a local attraction for our booming tourism industry, a fantastic venue for outdoor education, and a setting for conservation for years to come.