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SCSU professor hopes to save Tasmanian devils

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A wild and crazy cartoon character made them famous almost 60 years ago.

But now, real Tasmanian devils are dying from a newly discovered disease, and an assistant professor at St. Cloud State University is trying to stop it.

Marco Restani, who teaches wildlife ecology, is working with Australian officials to research what's known as devil facial tumor disease. The disease causes tumors that typically strike the marsupial's mouth before spreading and debilitating the animal. Most devils die within months of contracting the disease, Restani said.

"Everything is unknown," Restani said about the disease. "I'm really concerned about the disease depressing the devil population. Tasmanian devils are the icon species for the state."

The research is important because devils keep Tasmania's ecosystem balanced, Restani said. The recent illegal introduction of red foxes to the state could threaten several other animal species in Tasmania into extinction. A healthy devil population could help slow or even stop the foxes from establishing themselves in Tasmania, Restani said.

Money matters

Warner Bros., which created the cartoon character, Taz, has expressed interest in supporting the research, Restani said.

Australian newspapers have reported that the company is interested because it affects a species unique to the Australian state of Tasmania, and it's the namesake of the company's beloved cartoon character.

"Like any sort of natural resource issue, money is limited," Restani said.

Researchers are beginning to generate money for their work.

The unlikely link between Tasmania and St. Cloud was formed when Restani traveled the 9,700 miles to Tasmania on vacation in December 1999. He's been to Tasmania three times since.

On his second trip, Restani met Nick Mooney, who works with the Nature Conservation Branch in Tasmania.

In 1996, Mooney learned about a photo taken of a diseased devil, Restani said. But, it wasn't until six months ago that they realized the devils were dying of a dangerous disease. Restani didn't know how many devils exist, but they are a common animal, he said.

Conservation

Restani applied for and received a \$5,500 faculty research grant to return to Tasmania for six weeks this summer. He was there from mid-July to the end of August.

Restani and Mooney began trapping devils, discovering that the disease has affected the entire eastern half of Tasmania. The idea behind their survey was to gather preliminary data to secure research money, Restani said.

"It kills 80 to 90 percent of devils where it gets a foothold," Restani said. "It hits the older devils first."

Not much is known about the disease, he said.

"We know where it is, what proportion of the population it kills and that adults get it first," he said.

He suspects the disease spreads through contact among the animals, who bite and fight each other when they're feeding.

Restani hopes to go back to Tasmania during the holiday break this December and most of next summer.

"I have a personal research interest in wildlife disease," Restani said. "It interests me academically, and it's a conservation issue."

About the animals

- They look and behave nothing like their cartoon counterpart.
- A large male can weigh 25 pounds to 30 pounds.
- They're the world's largest carnivorous marsupials.
- Young devils are born 21 days after mating. Mating typically occurs in March.

-- Most devils are black and white. Some are completely black.

-- They emit a bloodcurdling howl when they're feeding. It sounds like a person who's in pain.

-- They're nocturnal animals with a life span of four to five years.

-- They're sometimes called Tasmania's janitors because they'll eat any animal matter. They feast on animal carcasses, including the bones.

-- Devils don't travel in packs. They tend to wander, gathering only when they feed on a carcass.

Source: Marco Restani, assistant professor of wildlife ecology at St. Cloud State University.
