

## Save the Tasmanian Devil!

By Yoav Daniel Bar-Ness September 14th, 2013 at 12:00 pm | Comment

Tasmania, the island state of Australia, is known for its tall trees, its wild mountains, its challenging caves, but most of all for its Tasmanian Devils. While the Warner Brothers cartoon character may be responsible for this infamy, the devils themselves are fascinating creatures. They are also endangered by a mysterious disease and are the subject of a unique citizen science project.



The [Save The Tasmanian Devil Program's Roadkill Project](#) is seeking any bits of information they can on the spread of a transmissible cancer that is decimating this project. And, as any Tasmanian road traveller knows, grimly, the road network is where wildlife meets citizen.

Tasmanian devils are the largest remaining marsupial carnivores on Earth. Known to the Tasmanian aboriginals as "purinina" and to zoologists as *Sarcophilus harrisii*, they are pouched marsupials like kangaroos and koalas. Unlike them, it is a carnivore, or rather, a scavenger. In 1936, the last thylacine, or Tasmanian tiger, died in captivity; it had been the previous largest remaining carnivorous marsupial. Over the last hundred thousand years, coinciding with the arrival of humans to Australia, many other animals have gone extinct, including browsing marsupials the size of a bison (Diprotodon) and meat eaters the size of tigers (Thylacoleo). The devils, and these other, extinct, animals used to live all over Australia- but Tasmania is the last habitat for the devil.

Since 1996, a curious disease has been ravaging them in a horrific way. A contagious cancer has been

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killing devils, apparently transmitted during the fights that they engage in regularly. It grows into hideous tumours, eventually killing the animals. There is no known cure.

It's hard to explain the emotional impact of this disease on Tasmanians. There is a great sadness at the loss of the Tasmanian Tiger, which was hunted to death in modern times, and to have the devil go extinct, perhaps in our lifetimes, is a cruel blow. So, admirably, the Australian and Tasmanian governments have committed substantial resources to medical and wildlife research.



Tasmania

Like many others, I saw my first devil as roadkill. Tasmania's roads are winding and surrounded by forest. Marsupials aren't too alert and are often hit by cars. It's a grim reality, but also evidence that there is a large amount of wildlife alive in Tasmania. Most hits are with wallabies (small kangaroos) or possums, but every so often, a devil gets hit.

The scientists at the [Save The Devil Program](#) have put out a call to citizen scientists to help track the progress of the disease, and the state of the devil population by reporting road kill sightings of Tassie Devils. There are thousands of printed forms asking for information on the exact location, and a dedicated telephone number for text messages and photo inputs.

These forms are easy to keep in the car, and help travellers and residents to play a part in putting devil sightings on the map. There are hundreds of roadkill devils reported each year, and while their loss is tragic, at least citizen scientists are monitoring the incidence of the disease.

Next time, we'll hear from the organisers at the Tassie Devil program and hear about their progress and data. Drive carefully, wherever you are!

*Photos: Save the Tasmanian Devil*

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**YD Bar-Ness** is a conservation ecologist based in the far corner of Australia, on the island of Tasmania. As a conservationist, he seeks to use geography and photography to create environmental education materials, and as a scientist, he specialises in climbing trees to explore the canopy biodiversity. He has previously been based in Delhi, Seattle, Perth, San Francisco, and Bangalore. He reckons the wilderness of Tasmania is the perfect venue for a Citizen Science Field Institute, and publishes *Tasmanian Geographic*, a free online documentary magazine at <http://www.TasmanianGeographic.com>. Check it out!

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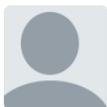
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