

MEDIA RELEASE

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Eureka! Devils team claims top research prize

A team of researchers based at the University of Tasmania has won one of Australia's top science prizes for its work in trying to save the Tasmanian devil from extinction.

The team, co-lead by Dr Menna Jones of the School of Zoology and Associate Professor Greg Woods from Menzies Research Institute Tasmania, was awarded tonight [Tuesday, September 6] the \$10,000 Sherman Eureka Prize for Environmental Research.

"This is a classic example of how the University of Tasmania leads the world in critical conservation research," the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), Professor Paddy Nixon, said tonight after the award was presented in Sydney.

The annual Eureka Prizes, presented by the Australian Museum, honour Australia's brightest minds in science research and innovation, journalism and communications, and leadership. The devils research team was one of three University of Tasmania finalists this year, Assoc Prof Michael Breadmore (Outstanding Young Researcher category) and Professor Paul Haddad (Outstanding Mentor) also being shortlisted.

"Winning a Eureka Prize will help highlight the plight of the Tasmanian devil and will also open doors," Dr Jones said tonight.

Dr Jones has devoted herself to the fight against the facial tumour since its emergence in the north-east of Tasmania in the mid-1990s. It is both a rare and unusual disease.

"This is the second only known case in Nature of a contagious cancer, so almost everything we do in research, immunology, immunogenetics, conservation management, in understanding the epidemiology of this infectious disease, is brand new," she explained in an interview aired on ABC Radio National's *The Science Show* last Saturday.

The team is taking a multifaceted approach to solving the problem of the disease.

“The really critical thing is that we try to bring devils back into the Tasmanian ecosystem to fulfil their ecological role as a top predator in suppressing cats, foxes and over-abundant macropod prey,” Dr Jones said. “This really should drive our management strategies. One management strategy involves captive insurance populations where in the event of extinction in the wild we could reintroduce them in perhaps 50 years’ time. We hope we don’t get to go down that route.

“We also are focusing our research on looking for patterns of disease resistance or reduced impact of the disease in parts of the state. We are also watching the tumour very closely because the tumour is evolving, and to see if the tumour might evolve towards something that is less virulent and less devastating for the devil.

“So the alternative scenario is that the devil and the tumour will both evolve and perhaps co-evolve, and they may learn to live together over time. We’re not pinning our hopes on that but this is where much of our research is focused, on the interaction between the tumour genetics and the devil genetics,” Dr Jones said.

The other members of the devils research team are Professor Hamish McCallum (Griffith University); Associate Professor Kathy Belov from the University of Sydney, and Mrs Anne Maree Pearse of the Save the Tasmanian Devil Program.

Much of the funding for the team's research was raised by the Save the Tasmanian Devil Appeal.

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