

MEDIA RELEASE

NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

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ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors



Public generosity fuels further Tasmanian Devil research for 2009

A new wave of cutting edge research aimed at combating the disease ravaging the Tasmanian Devil population is underway – thanks to the generosity of donors around the world.

More than \$82,000 in research grants and scholarships have been awarded in the latest grant allocations awarded by the Save the Tasmanian Devil Appeal, the formal fundraising arm of the Save the Tasmanian Devil Program.

Funds from the Appeal are allocated three times a year to support a variety of research and management projects nationwide, aimed at ensuring the survival of the devil against Devil Facial Tumour Disease (DFTD).

Grants in this round have been awarded to explore a potential vaccine, cancer treatments and identify natural genetic disease resistant devil populations.

At the same time scientists are also trying to solve some of the mysteries surrounding DFTD such as its production of immune suppressing proteins and the frightening prospect that genetic mutations may be helping it to spread through previously resistant devil populations.

Among the four important projects to receive assistance in this round is research by Menzies Research Institute PhD student Gabriella Brown, who was granted \$15,000 towards developing a vaccine against DFTD and investigating the effectiveness of common cancer treatments such as chemotherapy.

Dr Heather McGee, also from the Menzies Research Institute at the University of Tasmania, received \$17,700 to investigate how the cancerous DFTD cells evade the devil's immune system response.

Dr McGee will test the theory that DFTD produces cytokines, which are a type of protein suspected of suppressing the devil's immune response against the invading tumours.

Dr Anthony Papenfuss, of The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research in Victoria, also received \$24,800 to study whether DFTD tumours are evolving to overcome natural genetic resistance in some devil populations.

It is suspected that DFTD is undergoing selection through mutations or gene expression changes to defeat the devil's natural disease resistance as the disease spreads westward across Tasmania.

Dr Amanda Lane, from the University of Sydney, is working to unravel the genetics behind the possible disease resistance of devils of the West Pencil Pine region near Cradle Mountain.

Dr Lane, who received a \$25,000 grant, is working with Dr Kathy Belov, who this week was awarded one of Australia's most prestigious science prizes – the Australian Museum Eureka People's Choice Award. Dr Belov's research into the genetics of the Tasmanian devil has been funded through a number of grants awarded by the Save the Tasmanian Devil Appeal over the past three years.

Another past recipient of a research grant from the Save the Tasmanian Devil Appeal, UTAS PhD student Rodrigo Hamede, has this week received international attention for his article published in the scientific journal *Ecology Letters* on his work looking at how Tasmanian Devils socialise with each other in the wild. Mr Hamede's work has helped scientists understand how the disease is spread through a devil population and identifies potential methods for slowing the spread.

Professor Jim Reid, Chair of the Tasmanian Devil Research Advisory Committee which oversees the Save the Tasmanian Devil Appeal's grant allocations said: "It is great to see research funded by the Save Tasmanian Devil Appeal receiving national acclaim. This shows the work is of international significance and quality as well as contributing to saving the Tasmanian devil in the wild."

Since the Appeal began, public donations worth \$578,430 have been granted by the Save the Tasmanian Devil Appeal to support 50 research projects.

David Rowell, Chair of the Save the Tasmanian Devil Appeal Committee said: "The Save the Tasmanian Devil Appeal has funded many projects aimed at saving the devil in the wild and these are now receiving national awards. We thank all the donors, large and small, and trust they derive satisfaction from the impact their donations are making in saving this iconic animal."

For more information or to make a donation to the Save the Tasmanian Devil Appeal, visit: www.tassiedevil.com.au

Media Notes

For more details on the research projects please contact:

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