

## Book review

### SAVING THE TASMANIAN DEVIL: RECOVERY THROUGH SCIENCE-BASED MANAGEMENT

Edited by Carolyn Hogg, Samantha Fox, David Pemberton and Katherine Belov

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In 1996 a hitherto unobserved disfiguration on the head of a Tasmanian devil was photographed. The cause, a novel tumour, was eventually named Devil Facial Tumour Disease. Within 20 years it spread to > 90% of Tasmania and resulted in the remarkable decline in the distribution and abundance of this species.

The year 2003 saw the start of the 'Save the Tasmanian Devil Program', the first serious recognition of the threat facing the devil population. The Tasmanian government funded this program, and the skills of the Animal Health laboratories in Launceston were deployed in a forensic retrospective analysis of samples. This identified the first case as from north-eastern Tasmania in 1997. The Commonwealth government became involved in funding research seeking to characterise the disease and its impact on devil populations.

In 2006, the species was formally listed as Vulnerable under Tasmanian legislation. One important practical response was the establishment of insurance (disease-free) populations in Tasmania, mainland Australia and in zoos outside Australia. By 2009 the status of the species was upgraded to Endangered, and in 2015 the species was formally adopted as the faunal emblem of Tasmania.

This book, consisting of 24 chapters and contributions by 71 authors, is a detailed and scholarly account of the disease, its impact on wild populations, the response by researchers and the building of knowledge and understanding. This account provides a convenient, authoritative and objective synthesis.

As one would expect, much attention is given early in the book to research on the nature of the disease and its genetic basis (Chapters 3–6). The broader picture is not neglected, with other chapters providing detailed information on natural history, the role of other threatening factors, the value of monitoring populations, the establishment of insurance populations, reintroductions, the role of zoos and the nuances required for effective communication with the public.

Only three matters struck a discordant note with this reviewer. The book begins with a poorly thought out Chapter 1, distracting from the main themes of the book. It should have

been placed before Chapter 24. Chapter 2, a synopsis of the species' biology, ecology and behaviour, would have been a more appropriate introduction to the book. Chapter 1 seems to enthuse about the desirability of releasing devils in the wild on mainland Australia, where they occurred until c. 3 ka BP. I am surprised at this proposal. Have Australians not learned the lessons from the acclimatisation zeitgeist of the 1860s–1890s? This folly has left Australia, particularly the south-east mainland and Tasmania, with numerous European bird species, and more recently with native bird species released where they did not naturally occur (e.g. rainbow lorikeets at Perth, Western Australia, superb lyrebirds in Tasmania and laughing kookaburras in south-west WA and Tasmania). Other introductions (e.g. cats, foxes, cane toads) introduced by settlers as pets, for sport or for insect control provide ample evidence that permitting animals to establish outside their natural range is usually unwise. Release of devils in 2012 to form an insurance (disease-free) population on Maria Island, where they did not occur, soon impacted on nesting seabird populations.

The absence of a fresh look at historical records of devil declines in Tasmania, based on the online Trove resource provided by the National Library of Australia, is a significant omission. There is already abundant evidence gathered from old issues of newspapers of apparent disease-caused episodic declines and subsequent recovery of populations of *Dasyurus* species in southern Australia, including Tasmania. A chapter inserted after Chapter 2 would have provided an apposite review of the large body of anecdotes available for the devil. As one wit once remarked, the plural of anecdote is data.

Finally, why is the vernacular name 'devil' still in use? It belongs to a different age when superstitions were a cultural norm. 'Devil' was first used in 1807, 'native devil' in 1833, and 'Tasmanian devil' in 1843, according to the *Australian National Dictionary*, 2016. Throughout the book, it is clear that dual (i.e. Aboriginal–European) naming of geographical features in Tasmania is becoming accepted. So why not do this with this species? NJB Plomley's authoritative word list (1976) records five Aboriginal names and all are euphonious.

The authors and publisher deserve congratulations for a significant and splendid contribution to science. The book also demonstrates the occurrence and value of numerous interstate and international collaborations.

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