

Smart Stuff

with Twig Walkingstick



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
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OHIO AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH
AND DEVELOPMENT CENTER

For the week of
June 1, 2008

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Notes: Tasmanian devils lived on Australia's mainland, too, until about 600 years ago. Their now-small gene pool, scientists say, might be a cause of the bad, fast spread. Listing the Tasmanian devil as endangered, done just last month, "qualifies it for greater government conservation assistance," says a Canadian Press story. Tasmanian devils aren't dangerous to people. Their name, says the Save the Tasmanian Devil Web site (<http://www.tassiedevil.com.au/>), comes from "early European settlers, who were haunted at night by the sound of (their) spine-chilling screeches and demonic growls." They don't spin like tornadoes, either. Get too dizzy ...

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Q. Dear Twig: We also talked about Tasmanian devils — that scientists say they're endangered now. Why?

A. The short, awful truth: A weird new cancer. Only Tasmanian devils get it. People don't. Neither do other animals.

In just the past 10 years or so, **Devil Facial Tumour Disease**, DFTD for short, has spread among and killed nearly half (some say more) of Earth's Tasmanian devils. Nasty face and mouth tumors grow. Victims have a hard time eating. They starve and die in just a few months.

(Time out for background. Tasmanian devil: a **marsupial carnivore**. Lives nowhere else but **Tasmania**, an Australian island state. Looks like a small, burly dog. Black fur. Powerful jaws. And pointy sharp sticky-out teeth.)

"DFTD is extremely unusual as it is only one of three recorded cancers that can spread like a contagious disease," says the

Web site of a group called Save the Tasmanian Devil. "The cancer is passed from devil to devil through **biting**."

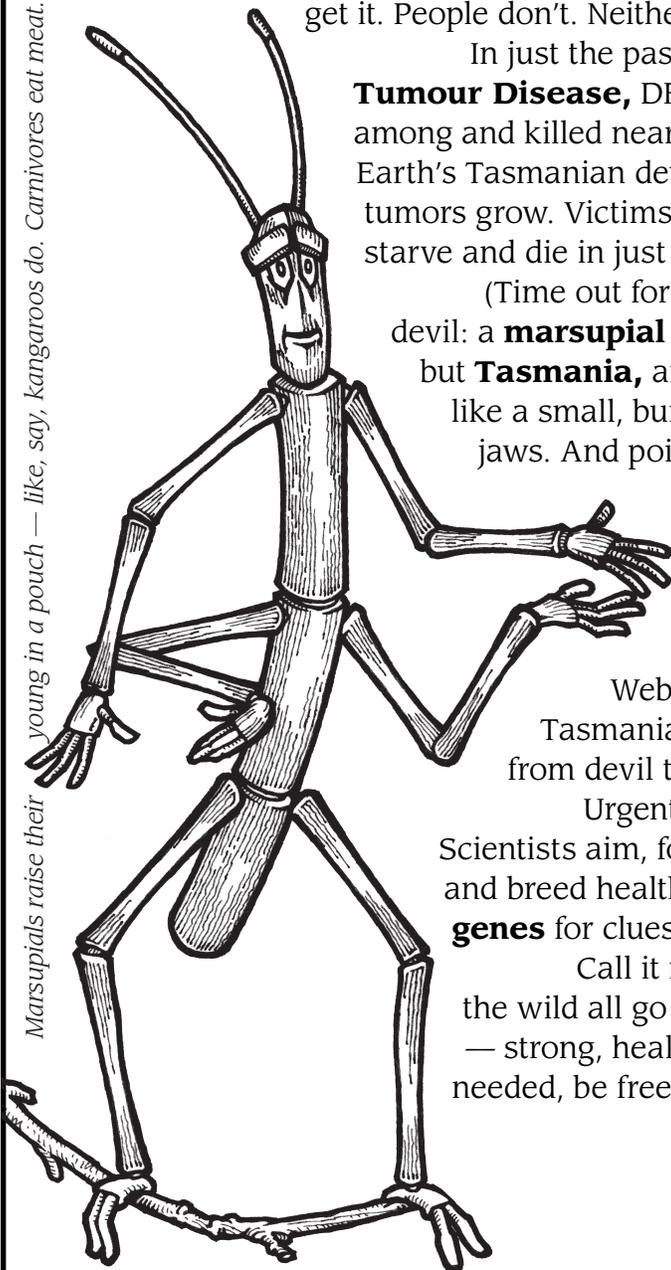
Urgent rescue work goes on.

Scientists aim, for instance, now to find, protect and breed healthy devils and also to study their **genes** for clues.

Call it insurance in case the ones in the wild all go extinct. Devils bred in captivity — strong, healthy, ideally resistant — could, if needed, be freed to help replace them.

Twig

Marsupials raise their young in a pouch — like, say, kangaroos do. Carnivores eat meat.



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