

Devices to prevent Tasmanian devils becoming roadkill being stolen and vandalised

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Mercury, July 22, 2016 CHRIS PIPPOS,

THREATENED Tasmanian devils and other wildlife are getting struck and killed on rural roads because the revolutionary devices installed to protect them are being stolen and vandalised.

Wildlife Safety Solutions — the company behind roadside virtual fence technology, which emits a high-pitched noise and flash of light when activated by headlights to scare off potential roadkill including devils — says it is experiencing “a massive problem with vandalism”.



Director Jack Swanepoel said “15 or more devices” had been stolen or vandalised on the Murchison Highway, where West Coast mining company MMG invested \$45,000 in the technology to reduce devil roadkill caused by trucks using its Rosebery site.

“People drive past and break them off and smash them,” Mr Swanepoel said.

“This site is definitely a big problem.”

He said a policeman in Rosebery recently contacted him to say a device was found in the yard of a West Coast man.

“A couple of them have actually been stolen,” Mr Swanepoel said.

“We’ve got to start doing something, because it’s only getting worse.”

An MMG spokesman said it was very disappointing that the virtual fencing, located at Fingerpost Crossing near the Waratah turn-off, had been stolen and damaged.

He said he had heard police recently pulled over the driver of a ute and located damaged devices.

“MMG is aware that some of the fencing has been vandalised or removed,” the spokesman said.

“Naturally this is disappointing given their purpose is to assist efforts to protect the Tasmanian devil and encourage population growth.”

He said the company was contemplating road signs to alert motorists to what the devices aimed to achieve.

“MMG will replace the fencing in the coming weeks,” the spokesman said.

Damage has also been done to virtual fences at Arthur River, in the far North-West, where the council-supported devices have been credited by the Save the Tasmanian Devil Program and an independent report with reducing overall roadkill by 82 per cent during recent trials.

The Parks and Wildlife Service has now been closely monitoring the vandalism, which had helped “put a stop to it” near Arthur River, he said.

Mr Swanepoel said he had spoken to Transport Department bureaucrats about erecting road signs explaining the value of the technology and warning motorists they faced hefty fines if caught tampering with devices.

However, he said the Government was not very keen on that because it might create a visual distraction.

And erecting security cameras would be cost prohibitive, especially given they too could get damaged by vandals, he said.

Virtual fencing costs about \$7000 a kilometre to install, with the devices placed at 25-metre-plus intervals along the road, forming a virtual “devil-proof” fence.

Mr Swanepoel said recent roadkill feedback confirmed the numbers spiked in areas where the devices had been vandalised or stolen.

Traffic is the second biggest threat to the endangered devil population after the devil facial tumour disease.

Figures released to the *Mercury* this week from the Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment showed 2592 devil roadkills have been reported to the devil hotline since the Save the Tasmanian Devil Program roadkill project started in 2009.

“In terms of the devil hotline, it is important to note that this consists only of devils that were reported to the hotline by members of the public — there may be more that the program does not hear about,” a DPIPWE spokesman said.

Virtual fencing was also now being trialled in the state’s South, near Eaglehawk Neck on the Tasman Peninsula.

Wildlife Safety Solutions is in discussions with the Department of State Growth about rolling out more virtual fencing to save wildlife and also benefit the tourism sector, with roadkill being one of the main gripes among visitors to Tasmania.

It would cost about \$20 million to cover most of Tasmania’s main road network with virtual fencing.

But the cost would be reduced by about 20 per cent if the devices were manufactured locally rather than imported from Austria, which is something being negotiated with a local research and manufacturing company, Mr Swanepoel said.