

Tasmanian devils give birth in semi-wild sanctuary on the mainland

ABC Science

28th May 2021

By Gemma Conroy

A group of Tasmanian devil joeys have been born in a "wild sanctuary" in Barrington Tops, just north of Sydney.

The project, run by conservation group Aussie Ark, aims to build a population of Tasmanian devils on mainland Australia, where they once roamed, to help conserve the species.

"We have been working tirelessly for the better part of 10 years to return devils to the wild of mainland Australia with the hope that they would establish a sustainable population," Aussie Ark president Tim Faulkner said.



Breeding and releasing Tasmanian devils into large fenced areas is a step in the right direction, but isn't enough to solve their population decline. (Supplied: Aussie Ark)

In late 2020, the Aussie Ark team released 26 adults, seven of which were reproductive females, onto a 400-hectare protected area in Barrington Tops.

The fenced area is designed to protect the devils from threats such as cats and foxes.

Months after their release, the roaming Tasmanian devils gave birth to seven healthy joeys.

Conservationists at Aussie Ark expect joey numbers to reach 20 this year.

But is breeding Tassie devils in a semi-natural environment the best approach, and is releasing them onto the mainland a good idea?

Back on the mainland?

Tasmanian devils haven't lived in the wild on mainland Australia for over 3,000 years, thanks to being wiped out by dingoes. Since then, they have been restricted to dingo-free Tasmania.

But while they have been safe from dingoes there, Tasmanian devil numbers have dropped by up to 90 per cent over the past three decades.

This is due to the spread of devil facial tumour disease — a highly contagious and fatal form of cancer. Now it's believed that fewer than 25,000 Tassie devils remain in the wild, with the IUCN Red List marking the species as endangered.

One approach for slowing the decline of Tasmanian devils is to build "insurance" populations that can be released on the mainland, where there is no devil facial tumour disease.

Some conservationists have also argued that releasing Tasmanian devils onto the mainland could help control feral predators, such as cats, that are detrimental to native wildlife.

But reintroducing devils onto the mainland is more complex than it seems, says Andrew Flies, a wildlife immunologist at the Menzies Institute for Medical Research at the University of Tasmania.

Tassie devils on the mainland would likely need to be protected from dingoes and foxes in large fenced areas, using up precious conservation dollars better used elsewhere, says Dr Flies, who is not involved in the Aussie Ark project.

"It's a trade-off," he said.

Are breeding programs enough?

While Tassie devils bred at the Aussie Ark sanctuary aren't technically released into the wild, the approach is a step in the right direction for conserving the species, Dr Flies says.

"They breed pretty well in captivity, but they lose a lot of their natural behaviours," he said.

"Saying they're back in the wild is not completely genuine, but it's nice to see that they are breeding in a semi-natural environment."

But it's going to take more than breeding the endangered animals in a protected area to bring them back from the brink for good, Dr Flies said.

"I think the best approach is multifaceted one where we keep an eye on them, see what's going on, maintain the insurance population and explore other ways of rebuilding the population.

"Everybody's goal is to have a thriving Tasmanian devil population in the wild."