

Eureka People's Choice awards: Vote for Kathy Belov

15 July 2009

Animal geneticist Dr Kathy Belov from the University's Faculty of Veterinary Science is a finalist in this year's Eureka People's Choice Awards, with voting taking place online now.

Members of the University and the public can vote for Kathy in the People's Choice Award via the Australian Museum's Eureka Prizes Website with the winner announced at a gala dinner in mid-August.

Dr Kathy Belov heads a team of young, motivated scientists who are striving to save the Tasmanian devil in the wild.

The Tasmanian devil has gone from being regarded as common, a little over a decade ago, to listed as Endangered at both a State and Commonwealth level. The wild population has declined by around 70 per cent since the emergence of the disease.

In October 2007 Dr Belov and a member of her team, PhD student Hannah Siddle, published a paper in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences on a contagious cancer found in Tasmanian devils.

The cancer takes the form of a facial tumour giving it the name Devil Facial Tumour Disease (DFTF). Its spread has been well documented - the disease is prevalent on Tasmania's east coast and as yet there is no cure. Her conclusion was that Tasmanian devils lack genetic diversity, rendering them unable to mount a defence against the cancer. This lack of genetic diversity is most probably attributable to a genetic bottleneck which saw large population crashes followed by a revival involving a small number of surviving animals.

The cancer is thought to be transmitted through biting that occurs during feeding and mating. In an effort to control the spread of the cancer, diseased individuals have been removed from the wild and a captive breeding program of healthy devils has been implemented across a number of zoos and reptile parks. At the same time Dr Belov and her team are hoping to find solutions to the devastating disease in the devils' genomes.

They have already started looking at isolated populations in the hope of finding new genetic types which can be interbred to create greater genetic diversity in the population. Greater genetic diversity, it is hoped, will allow the devils to respond to the cancer cells.

Dr Belov says the results so far have been "promising" but the researchers are battling against the clock. "In the last 10 years the population has dropped from 150,000 to about 50,000. It's predicted the disease will cross the entire range in the next five years and it will face extinction in the next 10 years. It's quite a frightening prospect," said Dr Belov.

In early July this year Kathy teamed up with veteran rockers Jon English and Peter Garrett (Federal Minister for the Environment Heritage and the Arts), to launch [Devil Rock](#), a number of rock concerts planned over the coming months to raise funds for Tasmanian devil conservation



Dr Kathy Belov and her team are dedicated to saving the Tasmanian devil from virulent disease.

and research, culminating in a Devil Rock concert, which will be held at the University of Sydney on 6 March 2010.

Young rockers will also be asked to get on board in mid August with the launch of **Battle of the Bands**, a Devil Rock competition developed in partnership with the NSW Department of Education. Young bands across Australia are being encouraged to post a song online with the winning band playing live at Devil Rock on 6 March.

Funds raised will go towards a research program which will work towards conserving the devil population in the wild, developing a captive breeding population, and finding a cure for the Devil Facial Tumour through an intensive

research program based at the University.

Click here to vote before 16 August and help Kathy Belov win the Australian Museum Eureka People's Choice Award.

[Save the Tasmanian Devil website.](#)

[Devil Rock website.](#)

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2009 Australian Museum Eureka Prizes People's Choice Award

VOTE NOW for **KATHERINE BELOV** Geneticist

Saving the Tassie Devil by identifying the link between genetics and the occurrence of the Devil Facial Tumour Disease

Vote for Kathy Belov to win the Eureka People's Choice award.