

8th Column (2017. 7. 15)

「Tasmanian Devil」

After what feels like only a few moments after I began to feel the refreshing summer breeze, it is suddenly that time of the year when the humid summer heat forces everyone to carry around a hand towel with them in order to dab at their sweaty foreheads. They say that people tend to get sick when the seasons change, but I hope you are all. Despite being an Australian, I am from Tasmania, which is quite cold compared to the rest of the country, so I am finding the Japanese summer especially hot and uncomfortable.

Speaking of Tasmania, today I would like to write about a rare beast that is only found in Tasmania, the Tasmanian devil. Just like a certain robotic cat from the future, the “Tassie devil” has a pouch around its stomach (females only). Animals with these pouches are classified as “marsupials”, such as the koala and kangaroo. The devil is one of the few carnivorous marsupials in existence, which makes them especially rare.

The idea of a carnivorous “devil” may sound intimidating, but in reality they mainly eat carcasses and weak animals. In general the devils will not attack animals that are bigger and stronger than them, and only prey on smaller, weaker and dead animals. In some ways, this may seem rather devil-like and quite fitting to their title of “the devil”. Their jaws are almost as strong as a crocodile’s, which enables them to crush and eat bones. Other than being called “the devil”, they have also been described as “the vacuum cleaners of the forest”, as they maintain the bush and farm hygiene by cleaning up carcasses.

These days, the devils venture out of the forest to eat the various roadkill available on roads all over Tasmania. Ironically, they often become roadkills themselves when they decide to eat on the road and get run over by vehicles, prompting wildlife conservationists to ask drivers to move the carcasses to the side of the road when possible.

Although they are called “Tasmanian” devils, they actually used to live across mainland Australia. However, due to the introduction of dingos, they quickly became extinct on the mainland and only those in Tasmania are still alive today.

The devils have had a rough history, but they are facing their biggest threat today. The Devil Facial Tumor Disease (DFTD) is a type of facial cancer that can spread through contact, which is responsible for the sudden decline in the devil population in recent years. The devils are classified as an endangered species, with ongoing research to cure DFTD. There has been encouraging reports claiming scientists have successfully treated Tasmanian devils suffering from the disease in March 2017.

The future is still uncertain at this time, but I personally hope an effective vaccine is developed in time to save our iconic mascot and forest cleaners.