

# *Rabbits “Near Threatened” with Extinction*

## **Declines brink ecosystems to the brink of collapse**

The European Rabbit (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) has been officially reclassified as “Near Threatened” with extinction, in its native range, by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Many people remain unaware that the European Rabbit is native to just Spain, Portugal and small parts of North Africa, from where it was introduced elsewhere by humans (e.g. into the UK and Australia). Similarly, many do not know that rabbits have declined massively in the Iberian Peninsula in recent decades, and that this has had a huge impact on wider nature conservation given that rabbits are a vital prey species for many other animals.

European Rabbits were once abundant across the Iberian Peninsula, even probably being the origin of the name of Spain, Hispania, “the land of the rabbits”, in Phoenician. However, due to a combination of excessive hunting and eradication programmes, habitat loss and the arrival of myxomatosis in the 1950s and Rabbit Hemorrhagic Virus in 1989, rabbit populations have declined dramatically and remain very low in most areas, e.g. just 5% of pre-1950s levels. This in turn has led to the decline in many emblematic predator species, including the Iberian Lynx and Spanish Imperial Eagle.

One major obstacle to reversing this decline is that rabbits and rabbit conservation in Spain and Portugal have not had the profile that they deserve, particularly at the international level where much more attention has been paid to controlling and eradicating rabbits in areas where they have been introduced and they cause considerable ecological and agricultural damage.

However, fortunately, this situation has now changed. In Portugal in 2006, national authorities reclassified the rabbit as “Near Threatened”, and in Spain in 2007 authorities gave the rabbit an even higher conservation status of “Vulnerable”. Now the IUCN has re-classified rabbits as “Near Threatened” across their entire native range of Spain, Portugal and parts of North Africa.

Andrew Smith, Chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission Lagomorph Specialist Group claims: “It is important to recognize the European Rabbit in its native range, as distinct from the areas in which it has been introduced. Introduced populations are often considered pests – but this rabbit in the Iberian Peninsula is a keystone species that must be considered in all aspects of managing the natural ecosystem; without the rabbit, this ecosystem is likely to collapse.”

Dan Ward, spokesperson for SOS Lynx, added: “It is hoped that these reclassifications can help pressure governments and conservation organisations to do more to conserve the species, and also help change the view of rabbits from being predominantly a pest to also being a vitally important component of native ecosystems.”

---

For more information about rabbits and rabbit conservation in Spain and Portugal, see the report “Reversing Rabbit Decline”, published by SOS Lynx in partnership with the IUCN Lagomorph Specialist Group, available at: [http://www.ualberta.ca/~dhik/lsg/report\\_lynx\\_rabit.pdf](http://www.ualberta.ca/~dhik/lsg/report_lynx_rabit.pdf)

### **Note to Editors:**

SOS Lynx is a conservation charity campaigning to prevent the extinction of the Iberian Lynx, the world’s most endangered feline, and a specialised rabbit predator. For more information see: [www.soslynx.org](http://www.soslynx.org)

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), is the world’s oldest and largest global environmental network - a democratic membership union with more than 1,000 government and NGO member organizations, and almost 11,000 volunteer scientists in more than 160 countries. The IUCN/SSC Lagomorph Specialist Group is responsible for the conservation and management of approximately 91 species of pikas, rabbits and hares, see: <http://www.ualberta.ca/~dhik/lsg/>