



PRESS RELEASE

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Rabbit decline threatens endangered predators and eco-systems

Diseases killing off rabbits are bringing rare eagles and the world's most endangered cat to the brink of extinction, says a report from conservation groups published today. It also warns that a new GM virus under development in Australia could, if it spread to the Iberian Peninsula, have devastating consequences.

Myxomatosis and rabbit haemorrhagic disease, combined with habitat loss and over-hunting, have brought rabbit numbers in Spain and Portugal to as low as 5% of population estimates 50 years ago. The Iberian Lynx, whose diet consists of 80-100% rabbits, has seen its own numbers fall to little more than 100 adults, according to the latest official figures, partly due to rabbit decline. The Iberian Imperial Eagle, another rabbit specialist predator has declined to around 150 pairs.

The report, "Reversing Rabbit Decline", calls for the rabbit to be reclassified under the IUCN Red List of threatened species, given that it is currently classified as Least Concern and this does not adequately reflect its recent and rapid decline in Spain and Portugal.

"Whereas the rabbit is seen as a pest in countries where it has been introduced, it is the keystone of the Mediterranean ecosystem in Spain and Portugal," said Dan Ward, a conservation consultant for SOS Lynx, and author of the study. "At least 39 predator species rely partly or exclusively on the rabbit, and rabbits are also important for many invertebrate and plant species."

The report also says that although some rabbit conservation projects are underway – including habitat improvement – they are not widespread or co-ordinated enough, and lack sufficient political support and long term funding. In addition, changes are needed in agricultural (including EU) policies to revert from modern intensive farming back to less intensive mixed farming that benefits rabbits.

Rabbit expert Andrew Smith, Chairman of the Species Survival Commission (SSC) Lagomorph Specialist Group of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) said it was now vital to recover rabbit populations in Spain and Portugal. "For many years our worry with European rabbits was

overpopulation in areas where they had been introduced, such as Australia. This report presents a dire warning that natural populations of the rabbit are seriously in jeopardy and that the loss of rabbits would be devastating to the ecosystem on the Iberian peninsula.”

Urs Breitenmoser (Co-chair of the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group) added “the Iberian Lynx is the undisputed flagship of conservation on the southern Iberian Peninsula. However, the ultimate keystone species of the ecosystem is the humble rabbit. Neither the Iberian Lynx nor the Imperial Eagle will survive the next few decades if rabbit decline continues. I hope that this report will push this eminent but neglected species into the limelight.”

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Notes to Editor:

1. The report is based upon interviews with recognised experts, and a review of the available literature.
2. Funding for the report was provided by Pelicano SA, a Portuguese real estate developer that is Founding Global Partner of One Planet Living, a joint WWF-BioRegional initiative to promote sustainable development and nature conservation.
3. SOS Lynx is a conservation charity based in Portugal campaigning to prevent the extinction of the Iberian Lynx. For further reports and more information see www.soslynx.org
4. The World Conservation Union (IUCN), is the world's largest and most important conservation network. The Union brings together 82 States, 111 government agencies, more than 800 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and some 10,000 scientists and experts from 181 countries. The IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group is responsible for the observation of the status and the conservation needs of the 36 species of felines, see: www.catsg.org . 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/>
5. Ecologistas en Acción – Andalucía is a federation of ecological groups in Andalucía, Spain that works to conserve the natural environment, and promotes peace and solidarity. See: www.ecologistasenaccion.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=10

