



LIFE Iberconejo

Drawing the baselines for the good management
of a Mediterranean key species,
the European rabbit

LAYMAN'S REPORT - JUNE 2025



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(LIFE20/GIE/ES/000731)



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The challenge



The European rabbit is an Iberian endemism and a key-stone species in the Mediterranean forest ecosystem. It plays a fundamental role as an “ecosystem engineer” and is prey to around 40 species, including the Iberian lynx and the imperial eagle. It is also of great socio-economic interest, as it is the main small game species and the wild mammal that causes most crop damages.

The European rabbit has a paradoxical double face: on the one hand, it is estimated that, on a general level, its populations in the Iberian Peninsula have fallen by more than 90% since the mid-20th century, due to changes in land use and diseases. But at the same time, the species has become more abundant in agricultural areas, with local population explosions causing significant agricultural damage.

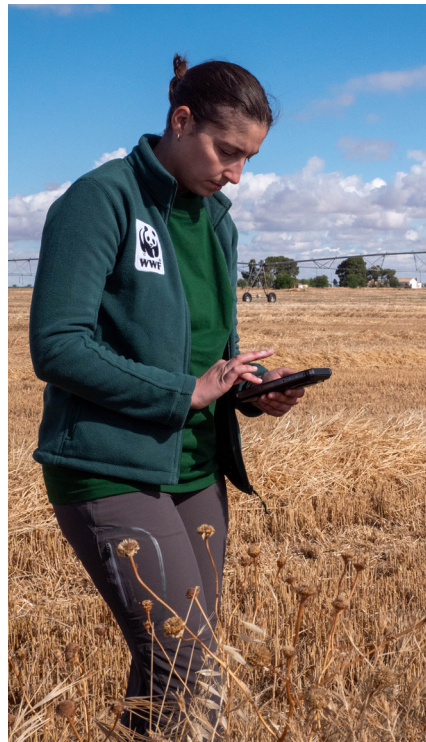
This double-sidedness greatly complicates the management of the species. This problem is compounded by other basic challenges: lack of information on the state of their populations, the impact of diseases or agricultural damage; lack of consensus on the most appropriate management practices; and the lack of a governance structure that integrates and coordinates the actions of stakeholders and interest groups.

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A common commitment



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In order to develop long-term solutions to the complex problems around the European rabbit, 15 organisations with very different profiles joined together in the LIFE Iberconejo project. Coordinated by WWF Spain, the partners include all stakeholders involved in the management of the species: public administrations, hunting and farming sectors, conservation NGOs and scientific entities.

The project has been developed from October 2021 to June 2025, reflecting the commitment of different actors towards a common goal: to lay the foundations for an effective and long-term management of the European rabbit, which allows it to recover its vital ecological role in ecosystems, while preventing damage to agriculture.



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INTRODUCTION



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Public administrations:



Conservation NGOs:



Scientific entities:



Scientific entities:



Hunting sector:



Farming sector:



Developing Iberian rabbit governance



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One of the main goals of LIFE Iberconejo was to create a governance structure to coordinate the management of the species at the Iberian level, in which other administrations and actors outside the project would be integrated. This led to the creation of the European Rabbit Iberian Coordination Committee (ERICC), which was initially responsible for drawing up the monitoring protocols for the species.

Although not a partner in the project, the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA) soon joined the ERICC, providing strong institutional backing for the initiative. New actors from the farming and hunting sector have also joined the committee, increasing its diversity, as well as other administrations from Spain and Portugal.

This model of collaboration will continue in the future, as the competent state administrations - the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in Spain, and the ICNF in Portugal - are committed to maintaining this governance structure: we will continue to work together and make progress on the different aspects related to the European rabbit (health, population, hunting or crop damages).



Establishing the baseline: **the Iberian monitoring system**



Despite the ecological and socio-economic relevance of the European rabbit, there was no adequate and sufficient information at Iberian level on the state of its populations, its health status or its impact on agriculture in certain areas. Overcoming this lack of information was the essential starting point for the sustainable management of the species.

Within the framework of LIFE Iberconejo, species monitoring methodologies were agreed upon – this will make possible to obtain reliable, updated and comparable results at the peninsular level.

The Iberian monitoring protocols, adopted by the Spanish and Portuguese administrations, were designed after a collaborative process in which all stakeholders participated, and were validated in field tests carried out within the framework of the project.



MONITORING



Consult the monitoring protocols (in spanish)

<https://www.iberconejo.eu/seguimiento-de-poblaciones/>



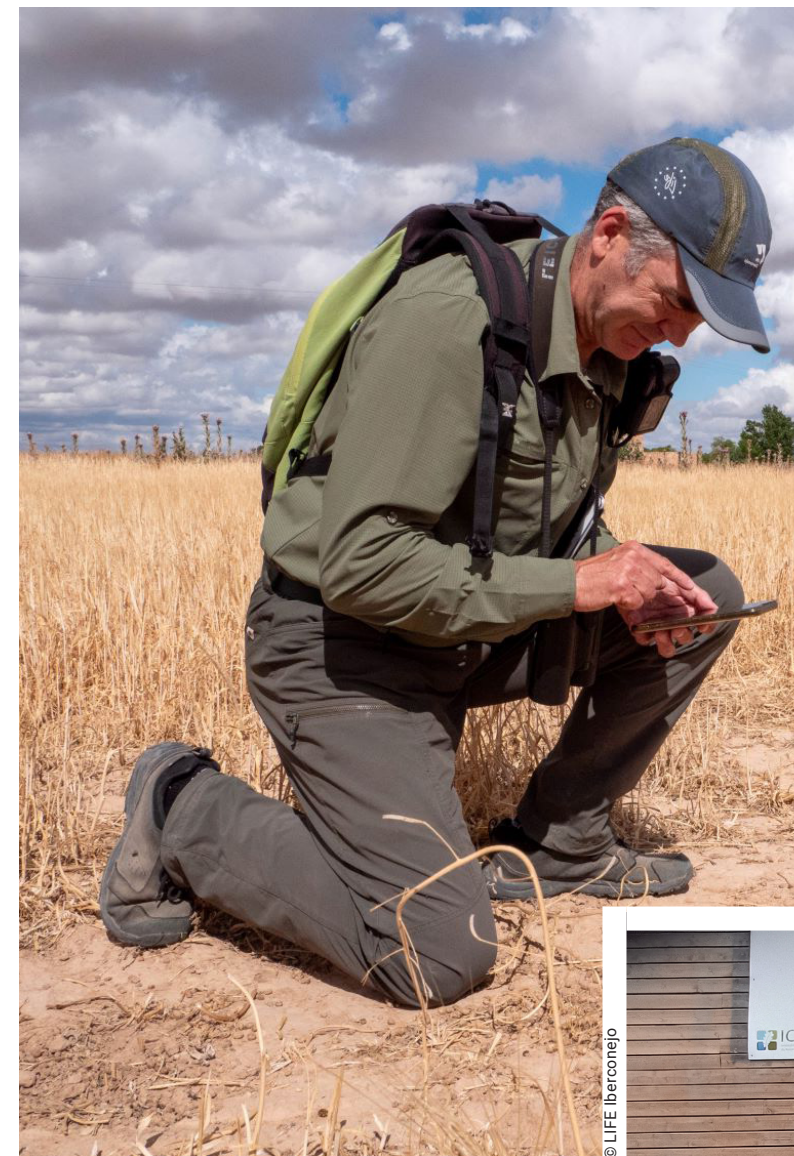
Creating a network of “rabbit watchers”



Training in monitoring methodologies for the European rabbit has been one of the main actions of the project: we delivered 87 courses, with a total of 1,676 participants including technical staff and environmental rangers from public administrations, hunters, farmers and volunteers from conservation NGOs.

The training included theoretical and practical sessions to be able to develop rabbit surveys in the field, with special attention to the use of the SMART tool (Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool), adapted to the Iberian scale within the framework of the project.

This network of European rabbit observers is the basis for a standardised, coordinated and long-term monitoring of the species in the Iberian Peninsula.



TRAINING

TRAINING IN FIGURES:

87 COURSES
IN
10 SPANISH REGIONS AND PORTUGAL
WITH
1.676 PEOPLE TRAINED
AMONG THEM,
713 PARTICIPANTS IN THE COURSES OF
THE ROYAL SPANISH HUNTING FEDERATION
(RFEC)



Check the training materials

<https://www.iberconejo.eu/en/training/>



Innovation and digitalization for smart rabbit management

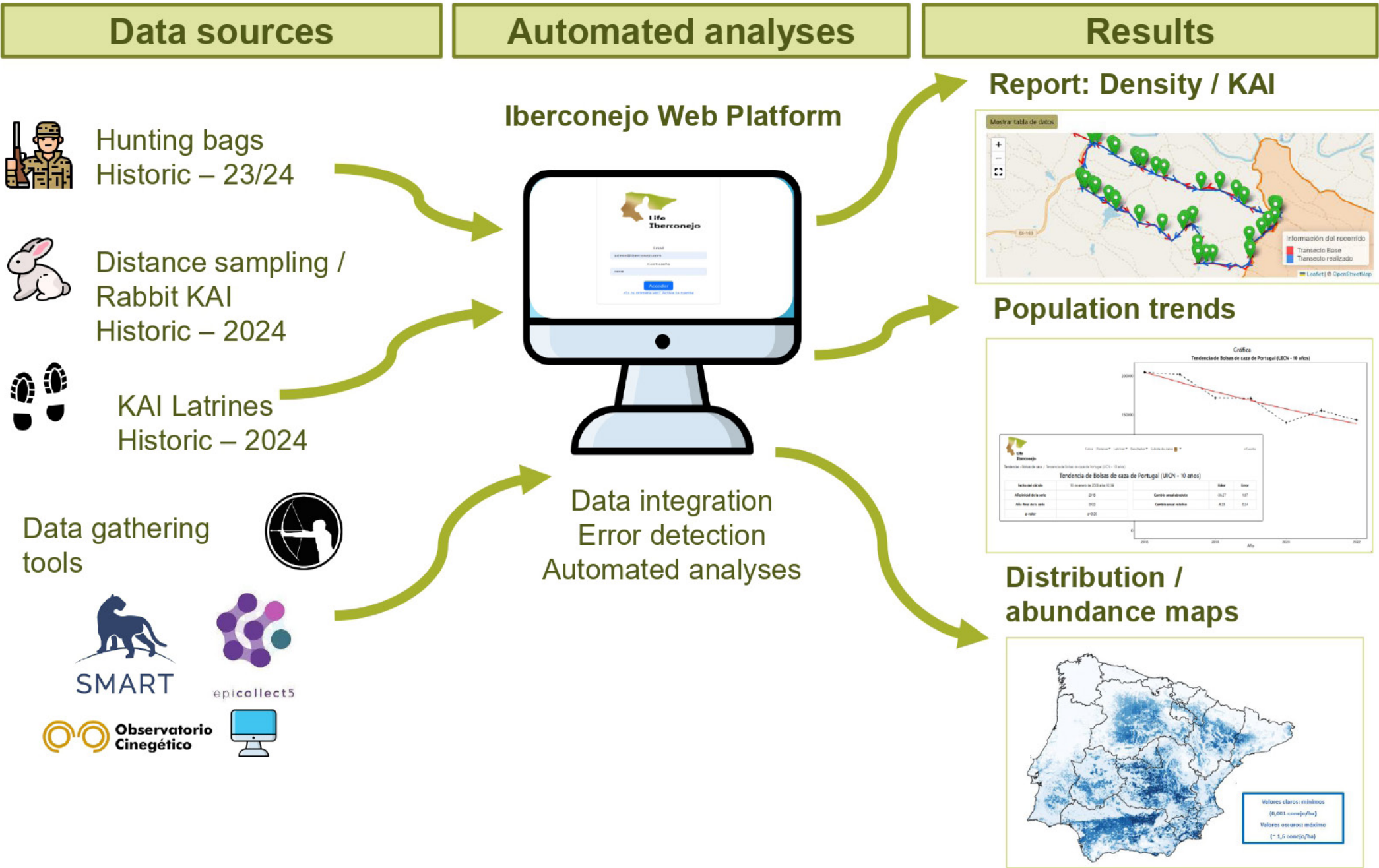
WE EVOLVE FROM THE FIELD NOTEBOOK TO THE USE OF SMARTPHONES AND THE CLOUD, WITH DIGITAL COLLECTION AND AUTOMATIC DATA PROCESSING.

The implementation of the Iberian monitoring system for the European rabbit has been possible thanks to the development and adaptation of technological tools for data collection and processing.

Information from various data sources and tools is automatically integrated and analysed through **the Iberconejo Web Platform**, providing administrations with comparable and updated data on the status of the European rabbit. Through the Platform, we have standardised the historical series of monitoring data, and we have turned it into a useful tool for the future - administrations and managers will be able to upload their census data and hunting statistics, detect errors, and analyse them in an automatized way.

Furthermore, with the aim of standardising and facilitating data collection in the field, we have adapted SMART, one of the most advanced digital tools for nature and wildlife management.

All this will provide vital information for data and evidence-driven management decisions - for the declaration of hunting emergencies due to agricultural damage, the promotion of populations, or the conservation of endangered species that prey on rabbits.



The first European rabbit census for the Iberian peninsula

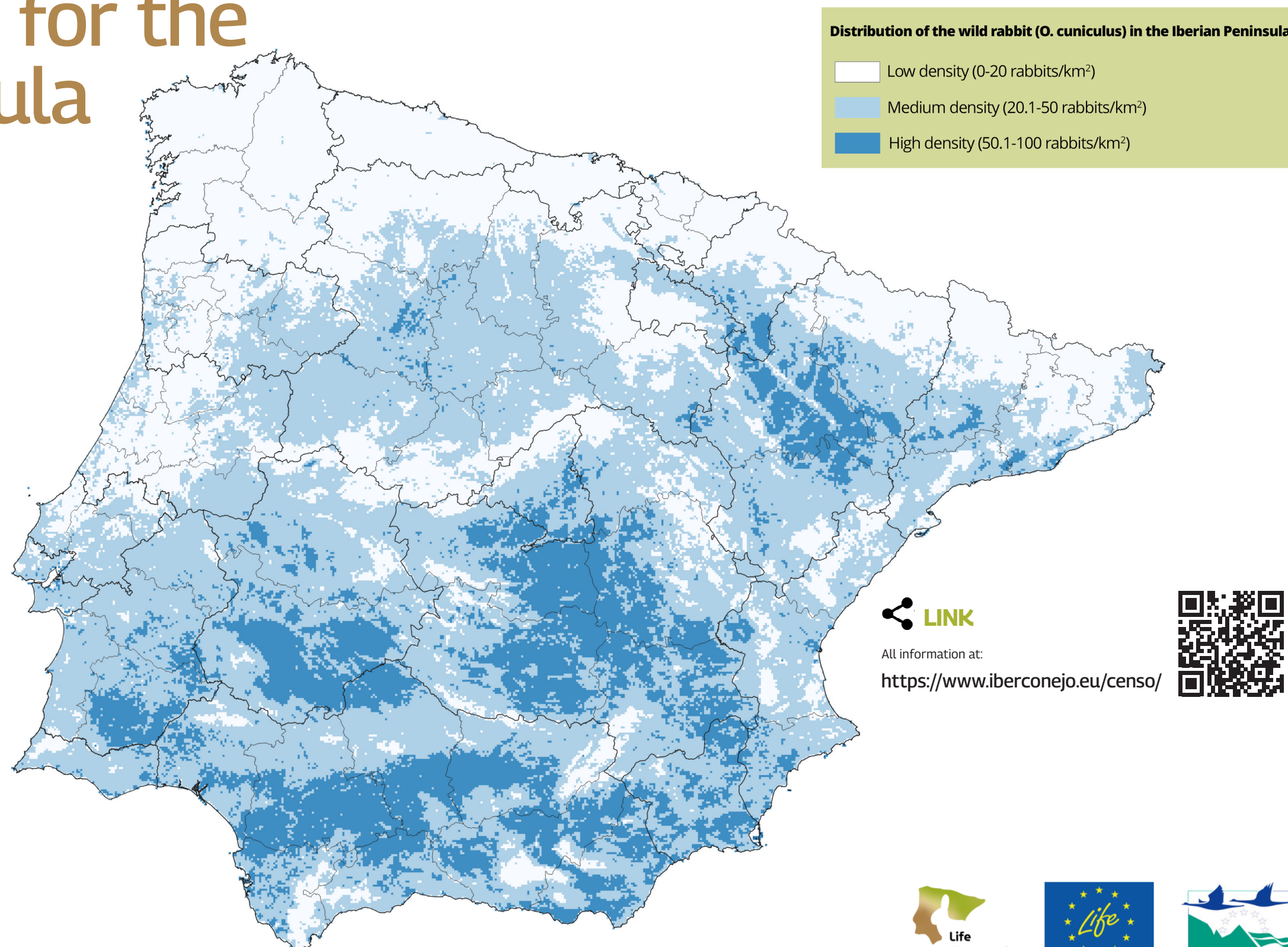
How many rabbits are there, where are they and how are their populations changing? One of the most outstanding achievements of LIFE Iberconejo has been the elaboration of the first Iberian census of the European rabbit, which allows us to know its distribution and abundance throughout the Iberian Peninsula at an unprecedented level of detail (a resolution of 2x2 kilometres). This tool is key for a more effective planning of the management of the species, based on reliable and up-to-date data.

The map, produced by researchers from the Institute for Game and Wildlife Research (IREC - CSIC, UCLM, JCCM) in collaboration with LIFE Iberconejo, shows a clear pattern - rabbit populations are abundant in the main agricultural valleys, but scarce in areas of Mediterranean forests and scrubland, such as Sierra Morena, the mountain ranges of Extremadura or large areas of Portugal.

This means that the vital ecological role of the European rabbit is in danger due to its disappearance from the most natural habitats, and also its social function linked to a sustainable hunting activity. Meanwhile, its negative socio-economic role, linked to crop damages, is growing.

The analysis of hunting statistics produced by the project also shows this double face of the European rabbit: between 2009 and 2022, the number of rabbits caught in agricultural areas has fallen by 10.17%, with an upward trend in recent years, while the species continues its steep decline in natural areas, with a reduction of 57.75%. These estimates correspond to the regions participating in LIFE Iberconejo: Andalusia, Castilla-La Mancha, Extremadura and the whole of Portugal.

Changes in land use, with the disappearance of the traditional mosaic landscape, and diseases, are the factors that have been linked to the decline in European rabbit populations.





© Lynxessitu



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How people see the double face of the rabbit

Is it a keystone species, just game or a "pest" for crops? The Institute for Advanced Social Studies (IESA-CSIC) has carried out a study to analyse in depth the perception of the rabbit by the people involved in its management, showing notable differences between areas of scarcity and areas of damage.

"EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR WE HAVE PERMITS TO TRY TO REDUCE RABBIT POPULATIONS AND YET IT IS IMPOSSIBLE. WE CANNOT DO THAT JOB, WE DON'T GET THERE."

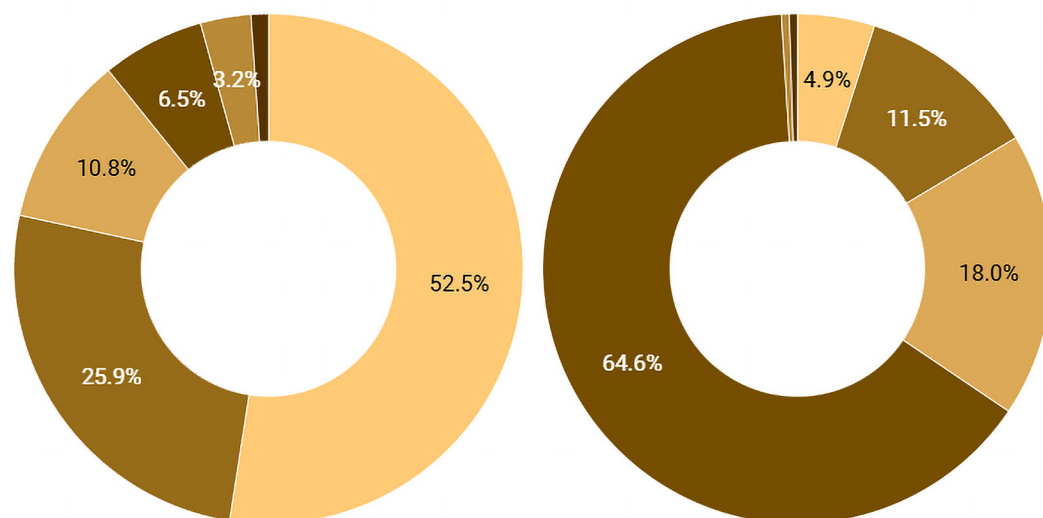
Hunters from Alcázar de San Juan

"WE CAN'T HUNT RABBITS ANYMORE BECAUSE THERE ARE NONE IN THIS AREA. IN THE 80S AND 90S IT WAS ABUNDANT, NOW IT HAS PRACTICALLY DISAPPEARED DUE TO THE VIRUS. THERE ARE JUST ENOUGH RABBITS LEFT FOR THE SPECIES TO SURVIVE."

Hunter from Calañas (Huelva)

HOW HAVE RABBIT POPULATIONS CHANGED IN THE LAST 10-15 YEARS? THE OPINION OF PEOPLE LIVING IN AREAS OF SCARCITY AND DAMAGE.

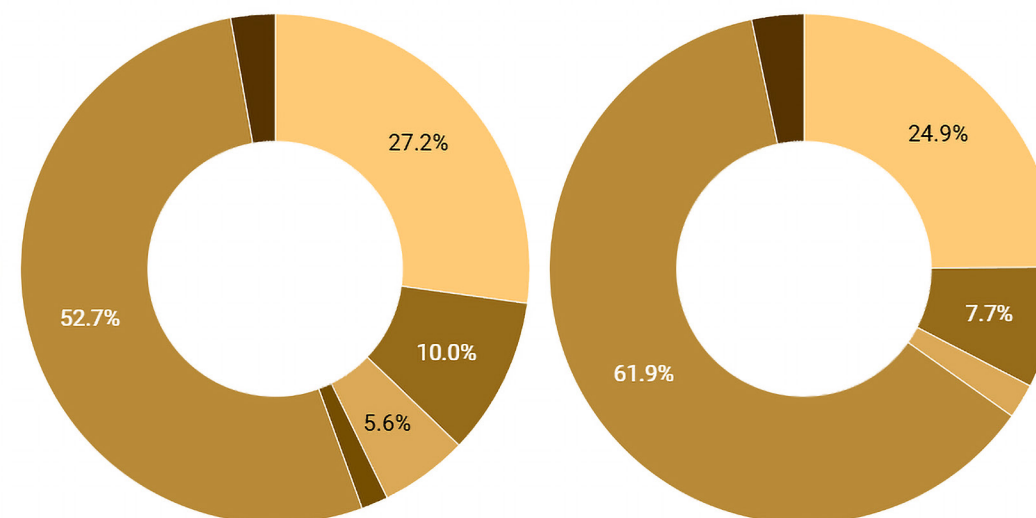
Areas of damages



Campiña Cordobesa

La Mancha

Areas of scarcity



Cardeña-Montoro

Andévalo

It has decreased slightly It is stable It has increased slightly It has increased significantly It has decreased significantly NS



See the social perception study (spanish):

<https://www.iberconejo.eu/percepcion-social-sobre-el-conejo-de-monte/>



A guide to recover rabbit populations and prevent crop damages

Catálogo de buenas prácticas para la gestión del conejo de monte.

Una propuesta de medidas financiadas por la PAC.



It is available for download (spanish or portuguese)

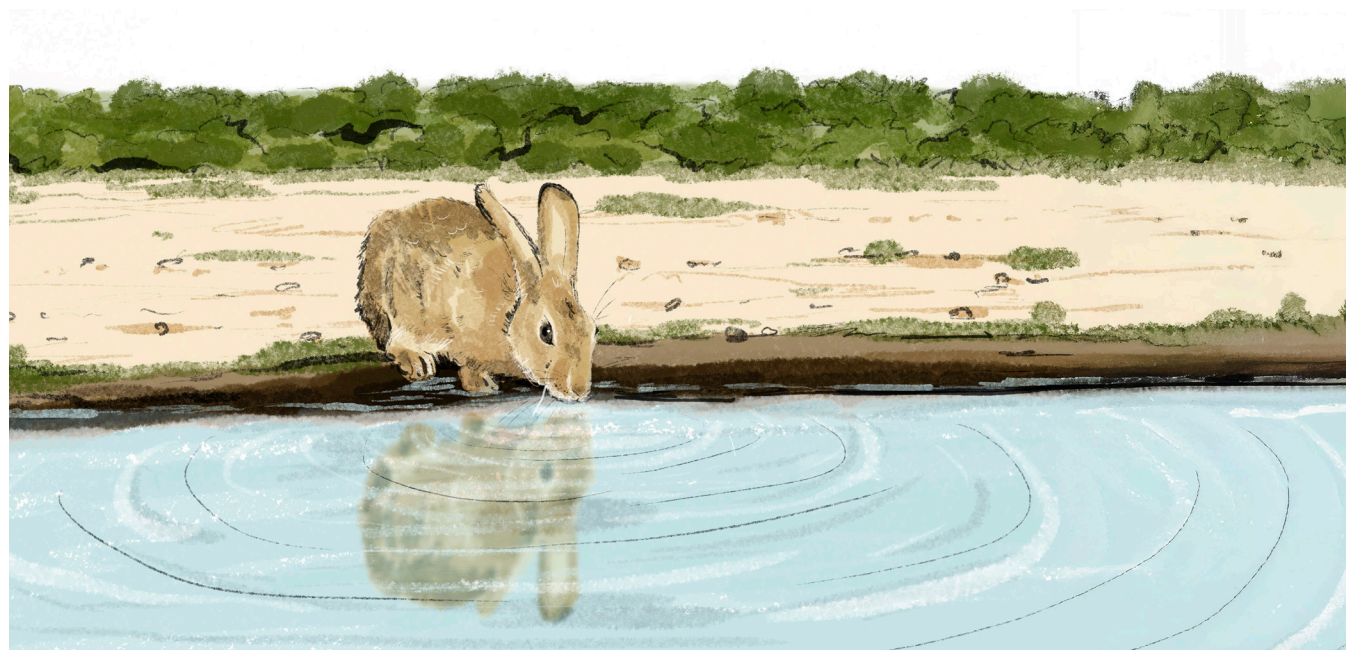
<https://www.iberconejo.eu/buenas-practicas/>



Recovering rabbits where they are scarce, and reducing agricultural damage in other areas, is no easy task. The key is to apply effective measures, adapted to local conditions and backed by scientific evidence. LIFE Iberconejo has brought together the most up-to-date knowledge in a **Catalogue of Best Practices** for a more balanced management of the European rabbit in the Iberian Peninsula.

The document contains 28 measures demonstrated to benefit both the environment and people: for the promotion of populations and also for damage prevention. It includes actions on habitat, repopulation, hunting or health management, and prevention measures such as ferreting or inhibitors.

The Catalogue sets out the evidence supporting each of the measures and, crucially, details the sources of funding available through the Common Agricultural Policy. The work aims to facilitate the practical application of these measures by land managers, hunting societies, farmers, technicians and public administrations.



Sharing knowledge, building solutions

The project has developed an intense communication and dissemination effort to bring its objectives and results closer to society in general, as well as to the sectors most involved in the management of wild rabbits. Through campaigns on social networks, press releases, videos and graphic materials, the project has managed to give visibility to the key role of the wild rabbit in our landscapes and the need for balanced management.

It has also been present at hunting fairs or scientific congresses, and has published content for magazines in the agricultural, conservation and hunting sectors, in order to reach those who directly influence the management of the species.



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In April 2025, more than 150 experts from across the Iberian Peninsula and beyond gathered in Faro (Portugal) to discuss the future of the species at the European Rabbit International Workshop. An inspiring and transformative event to consolidate three years of LIFE Iberconejo progress.



**Life
Iberconejo**

Basic data of the project

TOTAL BUDGET

2,103,880€ (EU contribution 1,157,108€)

DURATION

October 2021 to June 2025

15 PARTNERS

WWF Spain (coordination) | Junta de Andalucía | Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha | Junta de Extremadura | Instituto da Conservação da Natureza e das Florestas, I.P. (ICNF) | Fundación CBD Hábitat | WWF Portugal | Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha (IREC-UCLM) | Instituto Nacional de Investigación Agrária e Veterinária, I. P. (INIAV) | Faculdade de Ciências da Universidade do Porto - Cibio | Agencia Estatal Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC/IESA) | Fundación Universitaria San Pablo CEU | Unión de Pequeños Agricultores y Ganaderos (UPA) | Real Federación Española de Caza (RFEC) | Associação Nacional de Proprietários Rurais Gestão Cinegética e Biodiversidade (ANPC)



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Thank you

Our most sincere gratitude to all the people and organisations that have made the Iberconejo project possible. This project demonstrates that, in the face of complex challenges, only collaboration and shared knowledge between sectors allow us to move towards effective solutions, bringing together very diverse interests.

The Iberconejo project is coming to an end, but the advances achieved for the good management of the European rabbit remain. All the useful materials will continue to be available at www.iberconejo.eu

Contact

<https://www.iberconejo.eu/contact/>

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