

For immediate release

Year of the Rabbit – species hopping out of view?

Background: Celebrations begin on Thursday 3 February 2011 to mark the Chinese New Year and the start of the Year of the Rabbit. However, as we enter this new cycle in the Chinese zodiac, conservationists are warning that, in spite of their reputation as prolific breeders, nearly one in four rabbits, hares and pikas - from the order known as lagomorphs - are classified as Threatened on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™.

The IUCN SSC (Species Survival Commission) Lagomorph Specialist Group says that habitat loss, overhunting and disease are some of the main threats faced by lagomorphs. In its native range on the Iberian peninsula, European Rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, populations have drastically declined due to Rabbit Haemorrhagic Fever and habitat loss. In Portugal, 30% of the species was lost from 1994 to 2004; in the Iberian Peninsula as a whole, 20% declines are reported, with some populations on the verge of extinction. Elsewhere, death from the viral disease ranges from 40% to 100%. All domestic rabbits are descendants of the wild European Rabbit.

The Riverine Rabbit, *Bunolagus monticularis*, is listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List and is now only found in the Central Karoo region of South Africa. Numbers have fallen by about 60% in the past 20 years, mostly due to loss of habitat, as it lives only on prime agricultural land, none of which is protected.

The Ili Pika, *Ochotona iliensis*, first described about 30 years ago, is listed as Endangered. It lives in the remote Tian Shan mountains of northwest China, and recent censuses have shown that since its discovery it has disappeared from half of its previously known locations.

Key Issues:

- “Lagomorphs include some of the most endangered species on the planet,” says **Andrew Smith, Chair of the IUCN SSC Lagomorph Specialist Group and Professor at Arizona State University**. “Because of their ecological importance as prey, population declines of lagomorphs have led to catastrophic declines in predator species. In addition, some of the lagomorphs are important game animals formerly occurring in areas that are economically depressed. All these factors mean that strong action is necessary to conserve this group of animals, key players in the world’s ecosystems.”
- “Rabbits are considered to be a ‘keystone species’ as they have an effect on the environment that is disproportionate relative to their numbers. Because of this, their decline can have a huge impact on other species,” says **Luis Ruedas, member of the IUCN SSC Lagomorph Specialist Group and Professor at Portland State University**. “The reduction in rabbit numbers in the Iberian Peninsula led to a decline in the Critically Endangered Iberian Lynx, *Lynx pardina*, as well as the Vulnerable Spanish Imperial Eagle, *Aquila adalberti*.”

Editor's notes:

Lagomorph fact sheet available at: www.iucn.org/?6830

Lagomorph photos available at: <http://www.sendspace.com/file/4u0dkb>

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IUCN is the world's oldest and largest global environmental organization, with more than 1,000 government and NGO members and almost 11,000 volunteer experts in some 160 countries. IUCN's work is supported by over 1,000 staff in 60 offices and hundreds of partners in public, NGO and private sectors around the world.

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About the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™

The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ (or the IUCN Red List) is the world's most comprehensive information source on the global conservation status of plant and animal species. It is based on an objective system for assessing the risk of extinction of a species should no conservation action be taken.

Species are assigned to one of eight categories of threat based on whether they meet criteria linked to population trend, population size and structure and geographic range. Species listed as Critically Endangered, Endangered or Vulnerable are collectively described as 'Threatened'.

The IUCN Red List is not just a register of names and associated threat categories. It is a rich compendium of information on the threats to the species, their ecological requirements, where they live, and information on conservation actions that can be used to reduce or prevent extinctions.

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