

Hunter and farmer

But see, Orion sheds unwholesome dews,
 Arise, the pines a noxious shade diffuse;
 Sharp Boreas blows, and Nature feels decay,
 Time conquers all, and we must Time obey.

Alexander Pope, 'Winter – The fourth pastoral, or Daphne', 1709

Rabbit hunting is an extremely important pastime in Spain and France. In Spain alone there are 1.3 million hunters who hunt across some 30 000 hunting estates or 'cotos' of various sizes (Sánchez-García *et al.* 2012). Hunting supports a multi-million euro industry that not only supplies guns and ammunition but also extends into fashionable clothing, four- or five-star hunting tourism, and high-tech accessories.

Radio-collars are now seen as invaluable for locating ferrets should they feast on baby rabbits then sleep rather than driving more rabbits from the warrens. There are also satellite collars for hunting dogs. When these are used, hunters can see the locations of their collared dogs on the screen of a small, hand-held receiver. If the family at home is interested, the locations of the hunter and dogs can even be simultaneously downloaded via the internet.

In Spain, glossy hunting magazines such as *Trofeo* ('Trophy') are immensely popular because, although partly funded by advertisements for the fashionable end of town, they do not neglect traditional hunters and hunting. They are also informative. They are eager to pass on details of new research on game animals, and many hunting organisations make research papers on rabbit biology and diseases like RHD readily available to their members via the internet. However, they also raise issues quite different from those raised by scientists. Often they dictate issues that researchers and bureaucrats must tackle when developing hunting policies and setting the duration of hunting seasons.

When it comes to understanding how the hunters of Europe reacted to the spread of RHD there is little point in turning to the science literature. Hunting has traditionally relied on the actions of game-guards like Don Antonio in Almería as well as the hunters' broader activities to promote game species. There is heavy reliance on traditional management of game species and hunters generally do not have much patience for long-term research. For them, knowing whether or not rabbits might develop resistance to RHD in the long run is far less important than taking immediate action to resolve a lack of game. This means that, when RHD greatly reduced Spain's rabbit population, the most common response was to catch rabbits in areas where they were still relatively abundant and release them in underpopulated areas. Indeed, each year tens of thousands of wild rabbits are still moved about Spain in this way, and possibly up to 250 000 more are bred in captivity annually for release (Sánchez-García *et al.* 2012).