



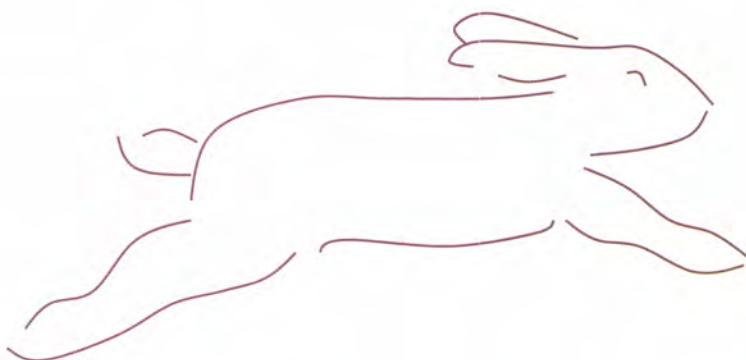
Mestrado em Biologia da Conservação

Influência da gestão do habitat na distribuição e abundância do coelho-bravo no Sítio Natura 2000 de Monchique

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Orientador:

Prof. António Paulo Pereira Mira



ÉVORA, 2009



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Influência da gestão do habitat na distribuição e abundância do coelho-bravo no Sítio Natura 2000 de Monchique

Resumo

O coelho-bravo, devido à sua importância ecológica e económica, tem sido alvo de diversos planos de gestão e vários esforços têm sido empreendidos no sentido de contrariar o decréscimo das suas populações. Este estudo foi realizado em três zonas de caça do Sítio Monchique e o principal objectivo é determinar se as medidas de gestão implementadas influenciam a distribuição e abundância da espécie na área de estudo. A abundância relativa foi interpolada com o método "Inverso do Peso da Distância" (IDW), e as relações entre presença de coelho e os descritores ambientais foram analisadas através de Modelos Lineares Generalizados (GLM). Os resultados da modelação estatística mostraram que as medidas de melhoria de habitat parecem ter sido determinantes para um aumento da área de distribuição do coelho-bravo nos locais intervencionados. São propostas novas medidas de gestão, cujo objectivo será promover a continuação do aumento da ocorrência e abundância da espécie neste local.

Influence of habitat management on wild rabbit distribution and abundance in Monchique Natura 2000 Site

Abstract

The wild rabbit, due to its ecological and economical role, has been the target of several management plans and considerable efforts have been made to enhance its populations. This study was held in three game estates located inside Monchique Natura 2000 Site and aims to determine if the habitat management actions implemented in the study area influence rabbit distribution and abundance. The relative abundance was interpolated to all study area with Inverse Distance Weight method (IDW) and the relationships between rabbit presence and the environmental descriptors were evaluated with Generalized Linear Models (GLM). The results of the statistical modelling showed that the management actions seem to have contributed significantly to an enhancement on the rabbit occurrence in the studied game estates. Several new management actions are proposed with the aim to continue to increase rabbit occurrence and abundance in this site.

Introdução Geral

A nível mundial e historicamente, o coelho-bravo tem assumido uma relação com o homem bastante ambígua, sendo alvo de gestão para diversos fins: manutenção, aumento ou redução da sua abundância. Se por um lado constitui uma componente importante na alimentação de cerca de três dezenas de predadores, incluindo espécies prioritárias para a conservação, como o lince-ibérico (*Lynx pardinus*), o gato-bravo (*Felis silvestris*), a águia-imperial-ibérica (*Aquila adalberti*) e a águia de Bonelli (*Aquila fasciata*) (Delibes & Hiraldo, 1981; Rogers *et al.*, 1994; Delibes-Mateos *et al.*, 2007), por outro, é considerado uma praga que pode causar prejuízos económicos e ecológicos importantes, particularmente nos locais onde foi introduzido (e.g. Daly, 1980; Bowen & Read, 1998; Courchamp *et al.*, 1999; Eldridge & Myers, 2001; Eldridge & Simpson, 2002; Scanlan *et al.*, 2006; James & Eldridge, 2007). Por fim, é objecto de caça (Alves & Moreno, 1996; Villafuerte, 2002; González, 2003), tratando-se de uma das espécies sedentárias de caça menor mais exploradas em território português (Alves & Moreno, 1996; Paupério *et al.*, 2006).

Na Península Ibérica esta espécie tem vindo a sofrer um decréscimo acentuado dos seus efectivos populacionais (Moreno & Villafuerte, 1995; Villafuerte, 2002; Alves & Ferreira, 2004; Barrio *et al.*, 2009). Só em Portugal estima-se que esta população tenha decrescido mais de 30%, em cerca de 10 anos (Alves & Ferreira, 2004). Este facto levou a que o coelho-bravo fosse classificado como Quase Ameaçado (NT – “*Near Threatned*”), segundo os critérios da União Internacional da Conservação da Natureza (UICN), na última revisão do Livro Vermelho dos Vertebrados de Portugal (Cabral *et al.*, 2005). Este facto tem implicações graves para as espécies que dele dependem, particularmente no caso de espécies ameaçadas.

São então, muitos os factores que tem estado na origem da diminuição do coelho-bravo, dos quais se destacam as alterações do habitat, a predação, a pressão cinegética e, sobretudo, as epizootias, nomeadamente a mixomatose e a doença hemorrágica viral (Villafuerte *et al.*, 1994; Moreno & Villafuerte, 1995; Calvete, 1999; Fa *et al.*, 2001; González, 2003; Calvete & Estrada, 2004; Paupério *et al.*, 2006; Devillard *et al.*, 2007).

A evolução da paisagem tem-se processado segundo dois planos opostos, ambos com consequências problemáticas para o coelho. Por um lado, houve uma intensificação da agricultura e um favorecimento do aumento de áreas florestadas, que levou à perda da heterogeneidade dos habitats que proporcionam abrigo e alimento para a espécie (Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Monzón *et al.*, 2004; Tarroso *et al.*, 2006). Por outro lado, houve um abandono da agricultura tradicional e, consequentemente, uma descara das práticas tradicionais de usos do

solo, como as queimadas controladas e as limpezas de matos, que também contribuíram para a rarefacção da espécie (Moreno & Villafuerte, 1995; Tarroso *et al.*, 2006).

Na Serra de Monchique, entre 1970 e 1990, ocorreu uma florestação a larga escala com eucaliptos - *Eucalyptus globulus* Labill. –, que substituíram a vegetação natural e os campos de cereal abandonados (Krohmer & Deil, 2003 *in* Beja *et al.*, 2007), contribuindo para uma descontinuidade no habitat favorável para o coelho-bravo e, conseqüentemente, para uma redução drástica na abundância e distribuição da espécie. A este aspecto, deve associar-se também a devastação causada em vastas áreas pelos incêndios ocorridos no Verão de 2003, que consumiram aproximadamente 80% desta Área Classificada (Ferreira & Alves, 2005).

Para além das alterações do habitat, também as epizootias introduzidas, nomeadamente a mixomatose e a doença hemorrágica viral foram determinantes para o agravamento da situação do coelho-bravo (Villafuerte *et al.*, 1995; Calvete, 1999; Fa *et al.*, 2001). A introdução da mixomatose na Península Ibérica ocorreu na década de 50 e em seis anos alastrou a toda a Península originando uma diminuição significativa da abundância e da área de distribuição da espécie (Soriguer, 1980; Calvete, 1999). No final da década de 80 e princípios da de 90, depois de uma recuperação parcial dos efeitos da mixomatose, o aparecimento da doença hemorrágica viral volta a provocar uma redução drástica, levando à extinção de numerosas populações (Calvete, 1999).

Numa população estável e abundante de coelho-bravo o impacto dos predadores é muito reduzido (Jaksic & Soriguer, 1981; Palomares & Delibes, 1997), no entanto, em populações já depauperadas devido às epizootias e à degradação do habitat, a predação constitui uma variável determinante que dificulta a recuperação desta espécie, para níveis de abundância semelhantes aos observados anteriormente (González, 2003; Paupério *et al.*, 2006; Lombardi *et al.*, 2007).

Por fim, o coelho-bravo é uma das espécies de caça menor mais exploradas em Portugal, não só pelo número de peças anualmente abatidas mas também pela quantidade de caçadores envolvidos, gerando receitas importantes neste sector de actividade (Alves & Moreno, 1996; Paupério *et al.*, 2006). Em Portugal, a espécie tem sido alvo de uma forte pressão cinegética, factor que não pode ser desprezado quando se analisam as causas do seu declínio. A inexistente ou inadequada gestão cinegética dos recursos faunísticos tem vindo a contribuir decisivamente para a sua escassez (Alves & Ferreira, 2004; Duarte, 2003).

Devido à sua importância económica e ecológica, a recuperação das suas populações tem sido um objectivo tentado em várias regiões (e.g. Moreno & Villafuerte, 1995; Martins,

2001; Angulo, 2003; Ferreira, 2003; González & San Miguel, 2004). O que se pretende é a criação de populações de coelho-bravo, estáveis e sustentáveis no tempo, que evoluam para um equilíbrio com factores como as epizootias virais, a predação ou a caça (Ferreira, 2003; Garcia & Gusmán, 2005; Calvete, 2006) e, posteriormente, a obtenção de núcleos com elevada densidade populacional a partir dos quais os animais possam recolonizar zonas periféricas (Garcia & Gusmán, 2005).

Para a implementação eficaz de medidas de gestão de habitat, que assegurem a viabilidade das populações de coelho-bravo, é importante determinar quais os factores que influenciam os padrões de ocorrência e abundância desta espécie, bem como as suas preferências alimentares nos ecossistemas mediterrânicos (Ferreira, 2003)

Em termos de requisitos ecológicos, a espécie ocorre preferencialmente em áreas de clima mediterrânico, com Verões secos e quentes e precipitações na ordem dos 500 mm anuais, e em terrenos ondulados com solos brandos, que apresentem um mosaico de zonas abertas (pastagens, culturas, clareiras) intercaladas com zonas fechadas (bosques e matagais mediterrânicos) (Blanco *et al.*, 1998; Daniels *et al.*, 2003; Duarte, 2003; Virgós *et al.*, 2003; Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Carvalho & Gomes, 2004). Nestes meios heterogéneos, os coelhos ocupam preferencialmente as zonas de orla, privilegiando, simultaneamente, a proximidade às áreas de alimentação e aos locais de abrigo (Moreno *et al.*, 1996, Palomares, 2001; Angulo, 2003; Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Carvalho & Gomes, 2003; Daniels *et al.*, 2003; Fernández, 2005).

O coelho-bravo é um animal herbívoro, que se alimenta de um amplo espectro de espécies vegetais, e o seu regime alimentar varia de acordo com o tipo e qualidade do alimento disponível ao longo do ano (Moreno *et al.*, 1996; Martins *et al.*, 2002; Cacho *et al.*, 2003; Ferreira, 2003; Rödel, 2005; San Miguel-Ayanz & Muñoz-Igualada, 2006; Beja *et al.*, 2007; Rueda *et al.*, 2008). A época de reprodução é coincidente com o período de maior quantidade e qualidade de alimento disponível, confirmando o carácter de reprodução oportunista do coelho-bravo em habitats mediterrânicos (Delibes & Calderón, 1979; Boyd & Myhill, 1987; Bell & Webb, 1991; Alves & Moreno, 1996; Blanco *et al.*, 1998; Duarte, 2003).

A gestão adequada e eficaz das populações de coelho-bravo pressupõe a actuação a diversos níveis: monitorização, gestão de cotas de abate, gestão de habitat e repovoamentos (Tarroso *et al.*, 2006).

A prática de repovoamentos é cada vez mais frequente, no entanto, este tipo de acções traz associado um grau de insucesso geralmente muito elevado, resultante da dificuldade de adaptação dos animais ao novo habitat e da não planificação e incumprimento

de uma série de premissas essenciais a uma boa execução desta medida de gestão (Ferreira, 2003; González & San Miguel, 2004).

Das medidas actualmente disponíveis para gerir as populações de coelho-bravo, a que acarreta investimentos menos avultados, produz impactos mais benéficos e efeitos mais duradouros é a gestão de habitat (Duarte, 2003; Ferreira, 2003). Esta constitui um instrumento essencial de recuperação do ambiente típico de ocorrência da espécie, que tem sido alvo de fragmentação e alteração gradual. Habitualmente, a gestão de habitat pode ocorrer a três níveis: melhoria da disponibilidade de alimento, de abrigo e de água (Ferreira, 2003; González & San Miguel, 2004; Ferreira & Sarmiento, 2006; San Miguel-Ayans, 2006). O principal objectivo é a criação de um mosaico paisagístico, que garanta a satisfação das necessidades básicas dos indivíduos da espécie, tornando-os mais resistentes às epizootias e à predação (Beja *et al.*, 2003; Ferreira & Sarmiento, 2006).

Os resultados obtidos com as tentativas de recuperação de coelho-bravo são diversos e não podem ser extrapolados, existindo ainda um grande debate sobre os factores que influenciam a dinâmica da espécie e quais as soluções mais adequadas à recuperação das suas populações (Angulo, 2003; Garcia & Gusmán, 2005). Este facto dificulta o estabelecimento de um protocolo generalizado que à partida garanta o sucesso das acções e implica o ajustamento de todos os procedimentos a cada realidade local (Garcia & Gusmán, 2005).

O principal objectivo deste trabalho foi verificar se as medidas de gestão de habitat implementadas conduziram ao incremento da abundância e distribuição de coelho-bravo, numa área de 4720 ha, inserida no Sítio Monchique. Mais especificamente, pretendeu-se: i) caracterizar as alterações na abundância e distribuição da espécie ao longo de três anos de amostragem, 2007-2009 (um deles antes da implementação de medidas de melhoria de habitat e dois após); ii) compreender a influência de várias variáveis ecológicas e topográficas na ocorrência da espécie; iii) quantificar os efeitos das alterações do habitat, originadas pelas acções de gestão implementadas, na distribuição e abundância do coelho-bravo; e iv) comparar a variação da abundância e ocorrência de coelho bravo na área de estudo, onde ocorreu intervenção, com as áreas ao seu redor que não foram alvo de gestão no âmbito deste trabalho.

Com os resultados obtidos, pretende-se dar um contributo para a tomada de decisões documentadas, na conservação, gestão e ordenamento das populações de coelho-bravo no Sítio Monchique e áreas envolventes.

Enquadramento

As acções e resultados apresentados no presente documento estiveram inseridos no projecto: “Medidas Compensatórias e Monitorização Específica para o casal de Águia de Bonelli (*Aquila fasciata*) de Odelouca, decorrentes do processo de Avaliação de Impacte Ambiental da Linha de Alta Tensão Sines-Portimão 3 a 400 kV”, mais especificamente na actividade “Aumento dos recursos tróficos do casal de Águia de Bonelli de Odelouca – Recuperação do Coelho-bravo”. Com esta acção pretendeu-se: i) a recuperação das populações de coelho-bravo e, acessoriamente, de outras espécies, como a perdiz-vermelha, para níveis adequados à sua exploração como recurso trófico relevante por parte de predadores ameaçados, particularmente a águia de Bonelli; e ii) a criação de mecanismos de forma a assegurar, a longo prazo, a manutenção de uma densidade alta de coelho-bravo. O financiamento deste projecto esteve a cargo da REN (Redes Energéticas Nacionais, SGPS) e a coordenação a cargo do consórcio EGSP/Ecosystema.

Caracterização da Área de Estudo

Localização

A área de estudo, que apresenta uma área de aproximadamente 4720 hectares (Figura 1), localiza-se no noroeste Algarvio, mais especificamente na Serra de Monchique (37º 16' N e 8º 29' O). Cerca de 88,5% da área pertence ao Concelho de Monchique e 11,5% ao Concelho de Silves (Cunha, 1980).

O limite da área de estudo engloba grande parte de três das Zonas de Caça cujas entidades gestoras acederam a colaborar no Projecto (Processo nº 4180 – Zona de Caça Municipal de Alferce, Processo nº 3993 – Zona de Caça Associativa de Alferce, Processo nº 3393 - Zona de Caça Associativa do Esgravatadouro, Montes Velhos e outras), condição considerada indispensável para a implementação de algumas medidas de fomento de coelho-bravo. Além disso, a área está, em toda a sua extensão, incluída no interior do Sítio PTCO0037 Monchique (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.º 142/97 de 28 de Agosto) (ICN, 2006a) e abrange, prioritariamente, grande parte do território do casal de Odelouca de águia de Bonelli. Estes dois últimos critérios tiveram em consideração as especificações exigidas pelo Senhor Secretário de Estado do Ambiente no Despacho Relativo ao Projecto

“Linha Sines-Portimão A 400 kV” (Rosa, 2006). A área inclui ainda zonas de habitat favorável com matos, que fornecem abrigo para a espécie (Calvete *et al.*, 2004).

Monchique, além de ter sido classificada como Sítio da Lista Nacional de Sítios Rede Natura 2000, mais recentemente, foi reconhecida como Zona de Protecção Especial (Decreto Regulamentar n.º 10/2008 de 26 de Março) (ICN, 2006b). Para além disso, é importante ainda referir que cerca de 58,8% da área de estudo é um Biótopo Corine (DGRN, 1991).

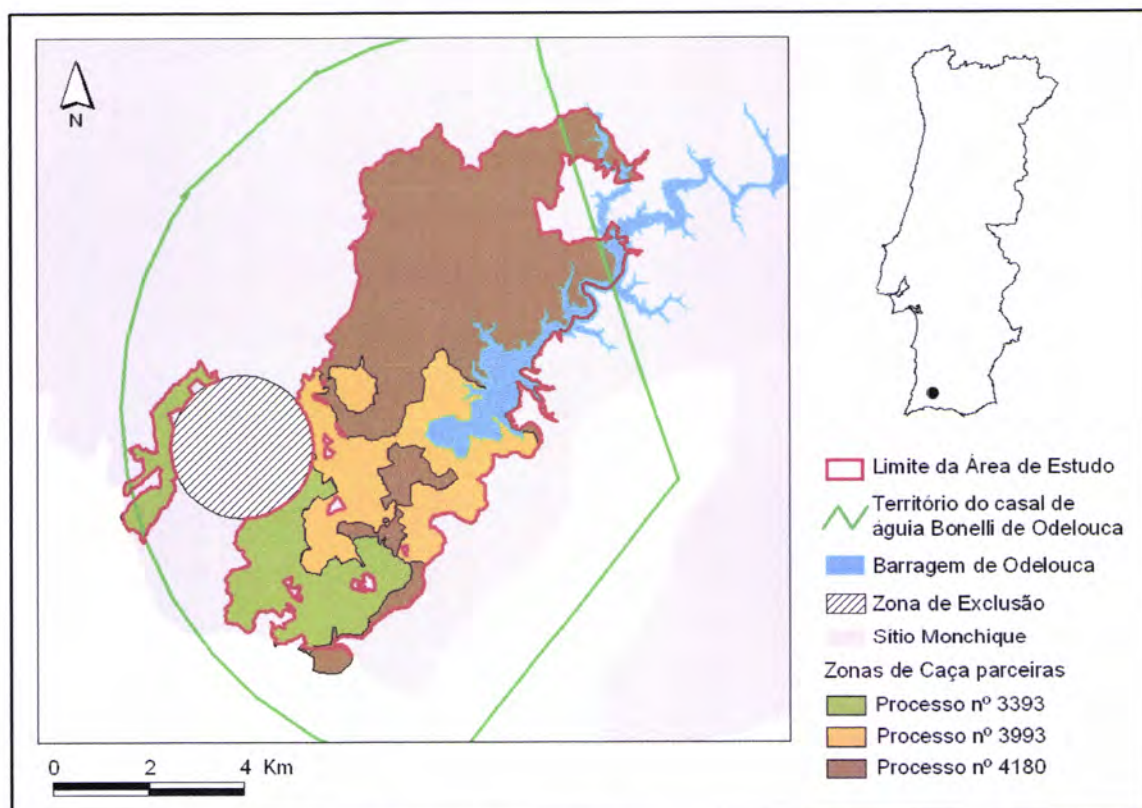


Figura 1 – Limite e localização da área de estudo.

Biogeografia e bioclimatologia

A tipologia utilizada para determinar a posição biogeográfica da área de estudo é a tipologia biogeográfica desenvolvida por Rivas-Martínez (Costa *et al.*, 1998; Rivaz-Martínez *et al.*, 2002). A área de estudo pertence à Região Mediterrânica, caracterizada por possuir um clima em que escasseiam as chuvas no Verão, podendo no entanto, haver excesso de água nas outras estações. Mais particularmente, insere-se no Superdistrito Serrano-Monchiquense que é um território constituído pela Serra sienítica de Monchique e serras xistosas (também quartzíticas e metavulcánicas) e graníticas, em geral de baixa ou média altitude (Grândola, Cercal, S. Luis, Espinhaço de Cão, Caldeirão).

A análise bioclimatológica da área de estudo foi baseada nos índices bioclimáticos propostos por Rivas-Martínez *et al.* (2002). Pode-se então concluir que a zona onde se localiza é caracterizada por um bioclima do tipo mediterrânico pluvioestacional oceânico (Rivaz-Martinez *et al.*, 2004a). No que diz respeito ao termótipo, encontra-se no andar termomediterrânico (Rivaz-Martinez *et al.*, 2004b), mais especificamente, sub-húmido a húmido, excepto nas zonas mais elevadas em que o atinge o mesomediterrânico húmido (Costa *et al.*, 1998).

A área de estudo apresenta características climáticas predominantemente Mediterrânicas com um Inverno húmido bastante suave, com níveis de precipitação elevados e um Verão praticamente seco e bastante quente. Apresenta, por um lado, uma temperatura média anual superior a 16º C (SMN, 1974a) e, por outro lado, valores de humidade médios anuais superiores a 70% (SMN, 1974d) e uma precipitação superior a 700 mm por ano (SMN, 1974b), com uma média de mais de 75 dias de chuva no ano (SMN, 1974c).

Geologia, litologia, topografia e solos

As formações geológicas existentes no local fazem parte da unidade geotectónica do Maciço Hespérico, que é formado por terrenos antigos, antemesozóicos, que incluem rochas eruptivas (sobretudo graníticas), sedimentares e metamórficas variadas. De um modo geral, pode dizer-se que todas estas rochas, Precâmblicas e Paleozóicas, foram afectadas por fenómenos de metamorfismo, resultantes da orogenia hercínica nas suas diferentes fases tectónicas (Real, 1987).

O maciço de Monchique, de forma grosseiramente elíptica, surgiu no final do Mesozóico como consequência de fenómenos vulcânicos que não tiveram actividade superficial e que foram responsáveis pela formação de um maciço do tipo anelar subvulcânico. Dada a idade das rochas, pensa-se que a sua instalação esteja ligada a fenómenos tectónicos alpinos (Silva, 1983). Este maciço é fundamentalmente constituído por rochas eruptivas alpinas alcalinas de sienitos nefelítico, com textura granular de grão médio a grosseiro (Silva, 1983). Cerca de 9,2% da área de estudo é composta por este tipo de rochas (Silva, 1982). A restante fracção da área de estudo (cerca de 90,8%) é constituída por formações sedimentares e metamórficas de xistos argilosos, grauvaques e arenitos, originados no Carbónico Marinho e Devónico (Ciclo orogénico Hercínico da Era Paleozóica) (Silva, 1982).

A nível topográfico a área de estudo apresenta um relevo sinuoso, característico das zonas de serra, que vai desde os 10 m de altitude, no vale da Ribeira de Odelouca, até cerca de

500 m, nas proximidades da Picota. Este corresponde ao segundo ponto mais alto da serra de Monchique (770 m), logo após a Fóia (CNA, 1982).

De uma maneira geral, os solos são pouco evoluídos e sujeitos a erosão acelerada. Removido o material de textura mais fina, observam-se fragmentos de rocha, finos ou mais grosseiros, que constituem o solo (ICN, 2006b). São predominantemente ácidos, variando entre 5,6 e 6,5 de pH, sendo que, na zona da serra, se encontram os valores mais baixos (Freitas, 1979).

Das formações geológicas, citadas anteriormente, derivaram unidades e complexos de solos constituindo um mosaico diversificado que permite classificar vinte unidades pedológicas distintas. Os solos com maior representação cartográfica são os solos incipientes - litossolos dos climas de regime xérico, de xistos ou grauvaques (Ex), que ocupam 86,4% da área de estudo. Os restantes tipos de solos com maior representatividade situam-se na zona da serra, propriamente dita, e são os afloramentos rochosos de sienitos (Ars) (cerca de 5,4%), os solos litólicos, não húmicos, pouco insaturados, normais, de sienitos (Psn) e a sua fase agropédica (cerca de 2,5% da área) e os solos litólicos húmicos câmbicos, normais, de sienitos (Mns) (cerca de 2,1% da área) (IDRHa, 1999).

Hidrografia

A rede hidrográfica da área de estudo pertence à bacia hidrográfica do Arade e é constituída por duas linhas de água principais, a Ribeira de Monchique e a Ribeira de Odelouca (DGRN, 1989). No entanto, a zona caracteriza-se por uma rede muito disseminada de linhas de água distribuídas pelos vales dos serros e que, devido às galerias ripícolas bem conservadas e densas, mantêm algumas zonas com água durante todo o ano, inclusivamente na estação mais seca (António Gamito e João Dimas, comunicação pessoal). Outras importantes linhas de água da área de estudo são a Ribeira da Boia, o Ribeiro do carvalho, a Ribeira da Pontinha e a Ribeira do Barranco de Monchicão (DGRN, 1989).

Para além das linhas de água, é também importante destacar a presença de uma albufeira de grandes dimensões, a Barragem de Odelouca, com cerca de 780 hectares, que se encontra ainda em construção e cujo objectivo será o fornecimento de água ao Barlavento Algarvio. Situa-se, mais especificamente, na Ribeira de Odelouca, a montante da confluência com a Ribeira de Monchique. Destaca-se ainda a existência de duas nascentes minerais: a de Alferce e a de Malhada Quento, ambas situadas na zona central da área (Calado, 1991).

Flora e ocupação do solo

O local apresenta condições bioclimáticas e geológicas específicas, nomeadamente no núcleo central da Serra de Monchique, com condições microclimáticas muito particulares, potenciando uma disjunção biológica (ICN, 2006a). A altitude e a localização geográfica da serra são factores de diferenciação para as regiões envolventes, permitindo a observação de manchas de vegetação únicas e completamente diversas (ICN, 2006b).

No que respeita a habitats protegidos, podem-se observar, nesta situação de disjunção, os adelfeirais (5230*) sob a forma de matagais altos perenifólios, dominados de forma extrema, ou quase, por *Rhododendron ponticum* subsp. *Baeticum*. Estas formações podem apresentar-se igualmente em mosaico com comunidades florestais ripícolas de amieiro (*Alnus glutinosa*) (92B0). Também disjunta é a presença de zimbrais silicícolas de *Juniperus turbinata* subsp. *turbinata* (5210), que surgem maioritariamente no Sudeste do país. Destacam-se ainda os medronhais (5330), matagais altos dominados por *Arbutus unedo* e *Erica arborea*, de características pré-florestais, constituintes das orlas naturais de bosques de quercíneas. Em termos florísticos é de assinalar a ocorrência da sub-população serrana do endemismo lusitano *Centaurea fraylensis*, espécie que se distribui por tojais e urzais baixos (ICN, 2006a).

De acordo com os solos existentes no local, xísticos e siliciosos, a vegetação potencial seria uma floresta mista dominada pelo sobreiro *Quercus suber* L. (Costa *et al.*, 1998), mas, entre 1930 e 1960, a vegetação natural foi substituída por plantações de cereal e, presentemente, encontra-se em vários estados de recuperação das perturbações agrícolas do passado (Krohmer & Deil, 2003 *in* Beja *et al.*, 2007). Hoje em dia a actividade agrícola é extremamente reduzida e a ocupação humana restringe-se a algumas casas isoladas e vales esparsamente cultivados (Beja *et al.*, 2007).

Actualmente, a área é caracterizada pela presença de tipos de vegetação atlântica ou subatlântica na zona de cotas mais elevadas o que leva a pressupor ser aquela região o limite sudoeste europeu das respectivas áreas de distribuição. Os sobreirais, bastante escassos, e matos resultantes da sua degradação (compostos maioritariamente por *Cistus ladanifer* L.), medronhais, manchas residuais de *Quercus canariensis* e soutos, dão uma ideia da distribuição dos agrupamentos em altitude que formam o coberto vegetal da serra. Para além destas espécies, e dependendo do tipo de solo, humidade e condições de perturbação, pode-se encontrar ainda *Ulex*, *Genista*, *Erica* e outras espécies de Cistaceas (ICN, 2006b).

Os eucaliptais e pinhais, que intercalam com áreas de matos rasteiros de urze e tojo, foram intensamente reflorestados nos anos 70 e 80 do século passado, substituindo a vegetação natural e zonas agrícolas abandonadas. Actualmente, as suas áreas de distribuição continuam a ser alargadas pelos efeitos da acção do homem ou pelo resultado dos incêndios florestais (ICN, 2006b).

A actividade de florestação intensiva com espécies exóticas, os incêndios florestais, a destruição da vegetação autóctone (matos e bosques mediterrânicos e vegetação ribeirinha) e o corte de árvores de grande porte, que constituem plataformas de nidificação para as rapinas, são alguns dos factores de ameaça à flora do local (ICN, 2006a).

Fauna

As características climáticas e geomorfológicas do local também lhe conferem condições para acolher diversos isolados populacionais de fauna, como é o caso do lagarto-de-água *Lacerta schreiberi*, cuja presença se encontra quase sempre associada à adelfeira *Rhododendron ponticum* subsp. *Baeticum*, e da boga-do-Sudoeste *Chondrostoma almacai*, que ocorre apenas nas bacias dos rios Mira e Arade, limitando a sua distribuição a alguns sítios do Algarve. Os ecossistemas ripícolas do Sítio Monchique são importantes também para a conservação da lontra *Lutra lutra* (ICN, 2006a).

A área de estudo está incluída numa zona de ocorrência histórica de lince-ibérico *Lynx pardinus* e mantém ainda características adequadas à sua presença (ICN, 2006a).

No que diz respeito à avifauna, esta é uma das principais áreas, no sul de Portugal, de ocorrência de aves de rapina diurnas e nocturnas, típicas de bosques mediterrânicos de quercíneas e matagais. A águia de Bonelli *Aquila fasciata* mantém, neste local, um dos núcleos populacionais mais importantes à escala nacional. Esta zona reúne ainda habitats apropriados à nidificação de águia-cobreira *Circaetus gallicus* e de bufo-real *Bubo bubo* (que mantém locais de nidificação na Ribeira de Odelouca), e à ocorrência ocasional de peneireiro-cinzento *Elanus caeruleus* e de milhafre-preto *Milvus migrans* (ICN, 2006b).

Influence of habitat management on wild rabbit distribution and abundance in Mochique Natura 2000 Site. A case study in three game estates.

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Abstract

The wild rabbit has an important ecological and economical role but its numbers have declined substantially in the last two decades, due to habitat fragmentation, predation, hunting pressure and mostly epizooties. To contradict this tendency, several actions have been implemented throughout the Iberian Peninsula, and different results have been obtained in distinct projects. This study aims to determine rabbit distribution and abundance in three game estates located inside Monchique Natura 2000 Site. We also aim to determine the main factors influencing rabbit occurrence before and after the execution of habitat management actions and thus evaluate the role of these action in promoting wild rabbit populations. Several measures were taken in order to improve habitat quality of the study area, consisting mostly on food enrichment (sown pastures), and water and shelter availability. A rabbit restocking was also performed in a 1.7 ha fenced area. The relative abundance of rabbit was evaluated in previously selected line transects and was interpolated through Inverse Distance Weight (IDW) techniques. The relationships between rabbit occurrence and the environmental descriptors were evaluated with Generalized Linear Models with a binomial error structure. The results of the statistical modelling showed that the habitat improvement actions, particularly the sown of pastures, contributed significantly to an increase in the rabbit distribution area in the places where these actions were taken. New management actions, aiming to connect several isolated rabbit nuclei and to continue to enhance the abundance of rabbit, are proposed in order to get, in a near future, a stable and self-sustained rabbit population in the study area and its surroundings.

Key words: wild rabbit, Monchique Natura 2000 Site, habitat management, IDW, GLM.

Introduction

In the Iberian Peninsula, the wild rabbit has decreased dramatically its numbers in the last decades (Moreno & Villafuerte, 1995; Villafuerte, 2002; Alves & Ferreira, 2004; Barrio *et al.*, 2009). The lost of suitable habitat is considered one of the factors that contributed to its decline (Moreno & Villafuerte, 1995; González, 2003; Devillard *et al.*, 2007), besides predation (González, 2003; Paupério *et al.*, 2006), hunting pressure (Calvete & Estrada, 2004; Paupério *et al.*, 2006) and the introduced epizooties, particularly, the viral haemorrhagic disease and the myxomatosis (Villafuerte *et al.*, 1994; Villafuerte *et al.*, 1995; Calvete, 1999; Fa *et al.*, 2001).

Changes in agricultural practices have been suggested, as an important cause for habitat modifications (Calvete *et al.*, 2004). Landscape development has been processed in mostly two different ways, both with problematic consequences to the wild rabbit. On one hand, occurred an intensification in agricultural practices, boosting the increment of forested areas, and leading to the lost of heterogeneity of habitats that provide shelter and food for the species (Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Monzón *et al.*, 2004; Tarroso *et al.*, 2006). On the other hand, the abandonment of traditional agriculture leaving behind the traditional land uses, such as controlled burns and scrub cleanings, also contributed to the increase of unsuitable habitat conditions for rabbits (Moreno & Villafuerte, 1995; Tarroso *et al.*, 2006). In Monchique, these trends have begun in the seventies and, between 1970 and 1990 there was a large-scale forestation, with eucalyptus - *Eucalyptus globulus* Labill. -, that replaced the natural vegetation and the abandoned crop cultivations (Krohmer & Deil, 2003 *in* Beja *et al.*, 2007), contributing to a discontinuity in suitable habitat for the wild rabbit and thus to a drastic reduction on the abundance and distribution of this species.

In the Mediterranean, wild rabbit is usually the staple prey of a wide variety of predators, carnivores and birds of prey, some of which are endangered, as the Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*), the European wildcat (*Felis silvestris*), the European polecat (*Mustela putorius*); the imperial eagle (*Aquila adalberti*) and the Bonelli's eagle (*Aquila fasciata*) (Delibes & Hiraldo, 1981; Rogers *et al.*, 1994; Delibes-Mateos *et al.*, 2007). It is also an important small game species (Alves & Moreno, 1996; Villafuerte, 2002; González, 2003), being one of the most exploited species in Portuguese territory (Alves & Moreno, 1996; Paupério *et al.*, 2006). Due to its ecological and economical importance, considerable efforts have been made, in several regions of the Iberian Peninsula, to enhance wild rabbit populations for hunting and conservation purposes (e.g. Moreno & Villafuerte, 1995; Martins, 2001; Angulo, 2003; Ferreira, 2003; González & San Miguel, 2004). Management strategies include predator control, hunting

management, vaccination campaigns, restocking and habitat management (Moreno & Villafuerte, 1995; Calvete *et al.*, 1997; Angulo, 2003; Tarroso *et al.*, 2006). The aim is to create stable rabbit populations, sustainable over time, that evolve towards equilibrium with factors such as viral diseases, predation and hunting (Garcia & Gusmán, 2005; Calvete, 2006), and later, to obtain nuclei with high density from which the animals could disperse and colonize peripheral areas (Garcia & Gusmán, 2005).

From the actions currently taken to enhance rabbit populations, habitat improvement is the one that needs lower investments; produces more beneficial effects and has more durable results (Duarte, 2003; Ferreira, 2003). In fact, this is an essential tool to restore the typical environment of the species, which has been subject to fragmentation and gradual deterioration. Usually, habitat management can occur at different levels: improving the availability of food, shelter and/or water (González & San Miguel, 2004; Ferreira & Sarmiento, 2006; San Miguel-Ayans, 2006).

Restocking operations are increasingly done, however, this type of action have a high level of failure, resulting from the difficulty of animals to adapt to the new habitat and from poor planning usually infringing basic assumptions, crucial for the correct implementation of this management action (Ferreira, 2003; González & San Miguel, 2004).

The results of rabbit management strategies are different for each location, which makes it difficult to establish a general protocol that guarantees the success of the actions, and thus, the adjustment of all procedures to each local is needed (Angulo, 2003; Garcia & Gusmán, 2005).

This study is part of a larger project, "Compensatory measures and specific monitoring of the Odelouca's Bonelli eagle couple", and more specifically, it is included in the activity "Increase of the trophic resources of the Odelouca's Bonelli eagle couple". The program was a result of the environmental impact evaluation process of the electric power line Sines-Portimão 3 to 400 kV and was funded by REN, SGPS ("Redes Energéticas Nacionais").

The main aim of this study is to determine if habitat management actions, implemented in a 4720 ha area in Monchique Natura 2000 Site, were successful on incrementing rabbit distribution and abundance. Specifically, we intend to: i) characterize the change on rabbit abundance and distribution during the three years of study, 2007-2009 (one before and two after the implementation of land management practices); ii) understand how topographic and environmental factors affect rabbit occurrence; iii) quantify the effects of habitat changes due to management (planting herbaceous food plots and installing drinking

troughs) on rabbit distribution and abundance; and iv) compare the changes on rabbit occurrence and abundance in the managed area with the ones in surrounding areas that were not managed by our team. With our results we expected to provide scientifically sound information to the development of guidelines for action to be taken, in order to recover wild rabbit populations in Monchique Site and areas nearby.

Methods

Study Area

Data were collected in an area of approximately 4720 ha, that delimits the three game estates, partners of the project, and where the habitat management actions were implemented (Process nº 3393 – Associative Game Estate of Esgravatadouro, Montes Velhos and others, Process nº 4180 – Municipal Game Estate of Alferce and Process nº 3993 – Associative Game Estate of Alferce). Because another similar project was being held in one of the game estates, we defined an exclusion zone, a circle with 1 500 meters of radius, where no interventions were done by our team.

This study area is located in the Norwest Algarve, Portugal (37º 16' N e 8º 29' O), more specifically in “Serra de Monchique” (Figure 1). Monchique, besides integrating the National List of Sites of the Natura 2000 Network (PTCON0037) (Resolution of the Council of Ministers n.º 142/97 of 28th August) and being classified as Site of Community Importance in July 19th 2006, was more recently recognized as Special Protection Zone (ZPE) (Regulatory Decree n.º 10/2008 of 26th March). It is an important area with the presence of endangered species like the Bonelli’s eagle (*Aquila fasciata*) and the Eurasian eagle owl (*Bubo bubo*) (ICN, 2006b), and is also included in a region of historical occurrence of the Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*) (ICN, 2006a). The rabbit has a fragmented distribution pattern (ICN, 2006a) and the hunting pressure is apparently low and localised (Beja *et al.*, 2007).

Biogeographically, the region is included in the Mediterranean region (Costa *et al.*, 1998; Rivaz-Martinez *et al.*, 2002), and, in terms of bioclimatology, is situated in the Thermo-Mediterranean bioclimatic zone (Rivaz-Martinez *et al.*, 2004a; Rivaz-Martinez *et al.*, 2004b). The winters are humid, with precipitation levels, above 700 mm per year (SMN, 1974b) and the summers are dry and very hot, with medium annual temperatures higher than 16º C (SMN, 1974a).

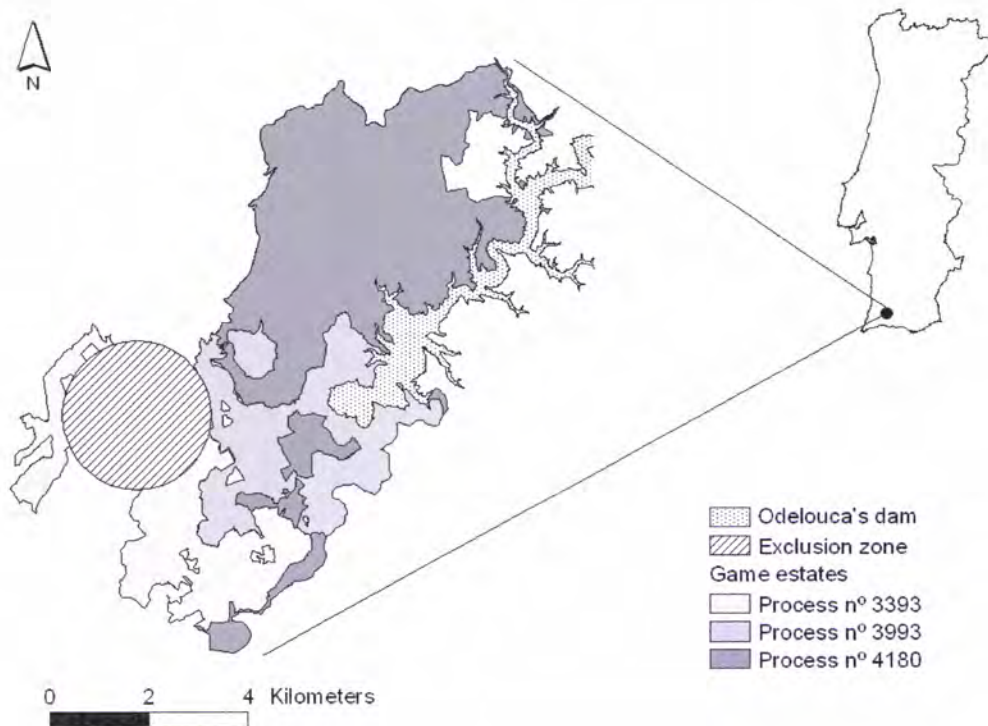


Figure 1 – Location of the study area.

The study area is a mountainous system, with altitude ranges from 10 meters, in the Ribeira de Odelouca's valley, to about 500 meters, near Picota (CNA, 1982). In general, the soils are poor and exposed to rapid erosion, this means that when the material of small texture is removed, the fragments of rock that compose the soil will be exposed (ICN, 2006b).

Hydrographically the area is included in the hydrographic bay of Arade and is composed by two main water courses, "Ribeira de Monchique" and "Ribeira de Odelouca" (DGRN, 1989). Nevertheless, there is a disseminated net of smaller water courses throughout the valleys, where, due to the dense riparian vegetation, some areas retain water during all seasons (António Gamito and João Dimas, personal observations). Nowadays, an important dam (Odelouca's dam) is being constructed inside the limits of the study area.

The hilly landscape is predominantly covered by dense Mediterranean scrub (53.1%), eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*) plantations (29.6%) and cork oak (*Quercus suber*) woods (4.7%), with sparse human occupation (Palma *et al.*, 2005). Agricultural activities are now extremely reduced, and human occupation is restricted to sparsely cultivated valleys (4.6%) and a few isolated houses (1.7%).

The main threats to native flora and fauna are: i) intense forestation with exotic species, ii) forestall fires, iii) destruction of native vegetation (Mediterranean scrubs and

woods and riparian vegetation), and iv) land abandonment and consequent reduction on land management (ICN, 2006a).

Habitat Improvement Measures

In late 2007 and early 2008 a series of measures were taken, in the study area, in order to improve habitat quality for the wild rabbit in terms of enrichment in food, and increasing water and shelter availability.

To enhance food availability for wild rabbit, a total 75 hectares of crops were seeded in several small elongated parcels, with less than 1 hectare each. The purposes were to avoid animal exposition to predation and to keep them dispersed, thus minimizing the risk of spreading diseases (Martins, 2001; Beja *et al.*, 2003; González & San Miguel, 2004). The establishment of crops for wildlife in the study area had the purpose of improving the characteristics of the original habitat, in order to increase the amount of food available for the rabbit and in order to enhance habitats in mosaic with greater edge effect, more suitable for this species (González & San Miguel, 2004; Ferreira & Sarmento, 2006).

To assure diversity and availability of food along the year, different types of crops were seeded: crops with species with auto-regeneration properties that don't need to be replanted every year, such as the subterranean clover - *Trifolium subterraneum* -, the yellow serradella - *Ornithopus compressus* - and the annual Wimmera ryegrass - *Lolium rigidum*; crops of cereals like wheat - *Triticum sp.* -, oats - *Avena sativa* - and the Wimmera ryegrass - *Lolium rigidum*; and crops composed with the *Fabaceae* yellow lupin - *Lupinus luteus*. In some places we used cereals and *Fabaceae* in association.

In order to assure water availability is not a factor determinant to animal distribution in an area it is recommended that this resource supply is as uniform as possible in space and time (González & San Miguel, 2004). So we installed 18 drinking troughs in order to guarantee that, during the dry season, any animal would find a water source in its 250 meters surroundings (Borralho *et al.*, 1998). We needed to create a commitment between covering all the study area and the logistics of drinking troughs regular maintenance, so, all areas with inadequate habitat for the species, like eucalyptus forests and locals with very steep terrain, were excluded from this action.

We also installed a total of 18 artificial warrens to provide shelter and reproduction sites to the rabbits. In a previous analysis of the study area, we concluded that it has good shelter availability due to the presence of extensive areas of dense scrub vegetation, but, in

terms of soil type, the conditions are poor to excavate tunnels. However, this habitat improvement measure was not used in the analysis, because the warrens were installed gradually, during the three years, in locals of the study area where the abundance of rabbit had already increased, in order to supply shelter and reproduction sites to those animals, so, their correlation with rabbit presence was obvious.

Rabbit restocking

As in previous evaluations of the study area rabbit abundance was very low, we decided to introduce rabbits by restocking. The main goal of this action was to establish a rabbit breeding core that would naturally expand to surroundings, in an area where the number of rabbits was very low.

To receive the animals, a fenced area with, approximately, 1.7 hectares was built inside the study area (Figure 2). To define the fence structure, particularly regarding the type and components and the distribution of water, food and shelter areas, we visited several fences constructed for the same effect in Querença (Algarve, Portugal) and in Moura-Barrancos Site (Alentejo, Portugal). Several authors were also consulted, for example: Manta (s.d.), González & San Miguel (2004), CMA-JA (2006), Piorno (2006) e Rouco *et al.* (2006b), and the opinion of wild rabbit specialists, was considered.

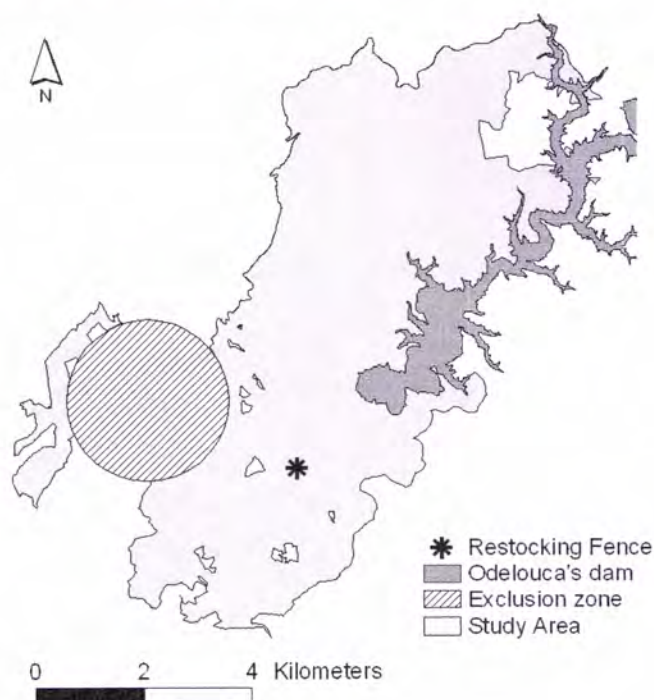


Figure 2 – Location of the restocking fence in the study area.

The restocking occurred in October's 28 2009, with the release 75 animals, 19 males and 56 females (1:2.9 ratio). They came from an accredited national producer, in a spot as near as possible to the study area (Guil & Moreno-Opo, 2007) and were vaccinated against myxomatosis and viral haemorrhagic disease (Calvete *et al.*, 1997; Sarmiento *et al.*, 2003; Guil & Moreno-Opo, 2007). Each of them was weighted, measured, treated for external and internal parasites and ear-marked with a numbered metal tag.

To guarantee the success of this measure it was important that the animals had a period of habituation (quarantine) to the new habitat, minimizing the pressures inherent to predation and lack of food, water and shelter (Piorno, 2006). The fence had 16 selective passages that were only opened two month after the restocking allowing the animals to disperse, after that period.

Sampling design and rabbit survey

The study area was covered by a grid of twenty-five hectares cells, defined as squares of 500x500 m (Monzón *et al.*, 2004). We selected, randomly, twenty-four squares (Figure 3) to assess the abundance of rabbit in three different occasions: June of 2007, June of 2008 and June of 2009, in the final of the breeding season, and just after rabbit densities had peaked (Macdonald & Barret, 1993). The sampling of 2007 occurred before the implementation of habitat improvement measures and the other two samplings were done after that.

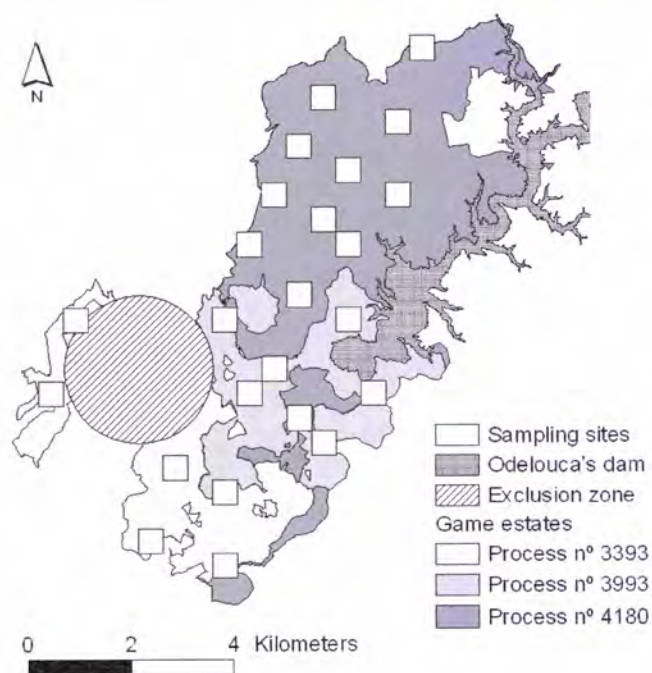


Figure 3 – Location of the sampling sites.

Rabbit surveys were based on the detection of indirect field signs of his presence, particularly latrines, in a 500 meters diurnal linear transect performed inside each selected square. Latrines are special communal sites where rabbits deposit faecal pellets for social reasons, in addition to depositing faeces apparently at random throughout their range (Monclús & Miguel, 2003). We defined latrine as a group of more than 20 pellets of rabbit within a circle with a 10 cm radius (Tarroso *et al.*, 2004). The search of latrines was also extended to a 2 meter wide strip to each side of the main path (Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Tarroso *et al.*, 2004). The survey strip was done as linearly as possible, avoiding marked curves or turn-backs, and using dirt tracks. To enhance comparability among sites sampled across the study area, transects were always surveyed by the same observer and the total length of transects was similar across sites. This indirect method, widely used to index rabbit abundances (Palomares, 2001; Virgós *et al.*, 2003; Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Beja *et al.*, 2007; Beja *et al.*, 2009), was used in this survey because the actual observation of individuals in the study area was not feasible due to dense vegetation (Beja *et al.*, 2007). The relative abundance of rabbit in each site and sampling year was then estimated from the total number of latrines recorded per kilometre of transect (Wilson *et al.*, 1996). Differences between rabbit mean abundance obtained in the initial sampling (2007) and in the final sampling (2009) were tested using the non parametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test, in SPSS 16.0 (SPSS, 2007).

Abundance Interpolation

Rabbit spatial distribution through the study area was mapped, for each sampling period, by interpolating to a continuous grid (with a 5 meters resolution), the abundances (Latrines per kilometre) obtained seasonally in each sampling location, using Inverse Distance Weighting - IDW (Legendre & Legendre, 1998). This method, when interpolating (data) points, gives more weight (mathematical emphasis) on the nearby points, and less on more distant points (Childs, 2004). We defined as interpolating points the centre of each sampling site. This process was done using the Spatial Analyst extension for ArcView 3.2.

Explanatory variables

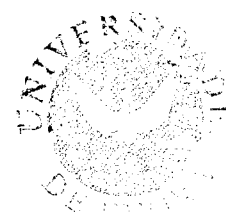
Twenty five continuous variables were collected within the sampling sites. These were grouped into two sets of predictors: environmental and topographic (Table 1). These variables were selected because they are known to affect rabbit distribution and abundance (Blanco & Villafuerte, 1993; Villafuerte *et al.*, 1994; Villafuerte & Moreno, 1997; Carvalho & Gomes,

2003; Duarte, 2003; Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Lombardi *et al.*, 2007). Some landscape variable values were changed in 2008 and 2009, due to the implementation of habitat improvement measures. A value was determined for each variable in each of the twenty-four sampling plots, the 25-ha squares of 500x500 m.

Table 1 - Explanatory variables, their units and acronyms.

Type	Explanatory variables	Units	Acronyms
Landscape	Proportion of agricultural areas	%	P_Agric
	Proportion of areas occupied by riparian vegetation	%	P_RipVeg
	Proportion of areas of scrub cover	%	P_Scrub
	Proportion of areas of tree cover without scrub cover	%	P_Tree
	Proportion of areas of tree cover with scrub cover	%	P_TreeScrub
	Proportion of open areas	%	P_Open
	Proportion of social areas	%	P_Social
	Perimeter of ecotone	M	Ecot_Per
	Mean patch size	ha	MPS
	Distance to the nearest watercourse	M	Dist_Wcour
	Distance to the nearest water reservoir	M	Dist_Wres
	Distance to the nearest drinking trough (Only to 2008 and 2009 data)	M	Dist_DriT
	Distance to the nearest water source	M	Dist_Wat
	Perimeter of watercourses	M	Wat_Per
Topography	Proportion of areas with slope < 15°	%	Slope
	Slope range	Degrees	Slope_Ran
	Number of altitude contour lines	N	N_Cont
	Average elevation	M	Ave_Elev
	Elevation range	M	Elev_Ran
	Index of the topographic roughness (surface area/flat area)	-	ITR
	Proportion of flat areas	%	P_Flat
	Proportion of areas oriented North	%	P_N
	Proportion of areas oriented East	%	P_E
	Proportion of areas oriented South	%	P_S
Proportion of areas oriented West	%	P_W	

All topographic descriptors were determined with the analysis of Altimetry maps (Instituto do Ambiente, 2003) using Surface Tools v.1.6 (Jenness, 2005), 3D Analyst and Spatial Analyst extensions for ArcView 3.2 (ESRI, 1999). The landscape variables were obtained in a Geographic Information System from land cover maps. Land cover maps were based on the photointerpretation of digital orthophotos taken from 2005 flights (1:5000) and validated through field checking. Medium patch size (“MPS”) was calculated using the Patch Analyst extension and the four distance variables (Distance to the nearest watercourse – “Dist_Wcour”, distance to the nearest water reservoir – “Dist_Wres”, distance of to the nearest drinking trough – “Dist_DriT”, distance to the nearest water source – “Dist_Wat”) were determined with the Edit Tools extension, both for ArcView 3.2 (ESRI, 1999).



Data Analysis

We used Generalized Linear Models (GLM) to assess the effects of the explanatory variables on the presence of rabbit response variable in the sampling sites. We used a binomial error distribution and a logistic link function. A different analysis was done for each sampling period (June 2007, June 2008 and June 2009).

Before constructing the models, the existence of any autocorrelations on rabbit presence in each sampling period was tested using Moran's I, because the existence of autocorrelation can highly influence the results (Segurado *et al.*, 2006).

Exploratory analysis revealed that some variables had a skewed distribution, so, the proportion variables were transformed using the arcsine transformation - $\arcsin(x)^{1/2}$ - and other continuous data were log-transformed - $\log(x+1)$ -, to approach normality and homogenize variances (Zar, 1999).

Preliminary variable selection was done through univariate logistic regression. The existence of unimodal responses was checked individually for each variable by introducing, into the univariate logistic regression model, the corresponding quadratic term and this tendency was verified graphically as well. Variables that presented a significance level ($P < 0.25$) were considered for further analysis (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000).

Prior to multivariate analysis, a screening for collinearity of continuous variables selected in the univariate stage was done. Spearman correlation coefficients were computed for all pairs of variables and, for pairs with a correlation coefficient higher than 0.7 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), only the explanatory variable with the most biological meaning was retained for further analysis.

Combinations of selected variables (maximum of three variables) were then evaluated systematically and the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) was used to select the best model for each sampling period (Burnham & Anderson, 2002; Zuur *et al.*, 2007). The best model had the lowest value of AIC and the variables were considered significant for a $P < 0.10$ (Burnham & Anderson, 2002).

To complete the analysis we tested the existence of significant differences between the mean values of each environmental descriptor, before and after the implementation of habitat improvement actions, using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test. We only analysed the variables that suffered changes with the interventions.

All statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 16.0 (SPSS, 2007), Brodgar 2.5.6 (Highland Statistics, 2007) and R 2.6.

Intervention VS Non intervention

A parallel sampling, also in the ambit of the referred project, was done in a 15 000 hectares area, in which our study area is included (Figure 4). 70 plots with twenty-five hectares each, defined as squares of 500x500 m, were selected and sampled in two different occasions: winter of 2007, before the implementation of habitat improvement actions and summer of 2009, after that. From this total of sampling sites, twenty were located inside our study site.

Rabbit surveys consisted also on latrine counting, in a 500 meters diurnal linear transect carried out in each selected square. The relative abundance of rabbits in each transect was equally estimated from the total number of latrines recorded per kilometre travelled (Wilson *et al.*, 1996). For each sampling period we computed a mean value of abundance of rabbits differentiating among plots inside the study site, where habitat improvement was done and plots outside this site, where habitat management for rabbits, at least concerning our project, was not implemented.

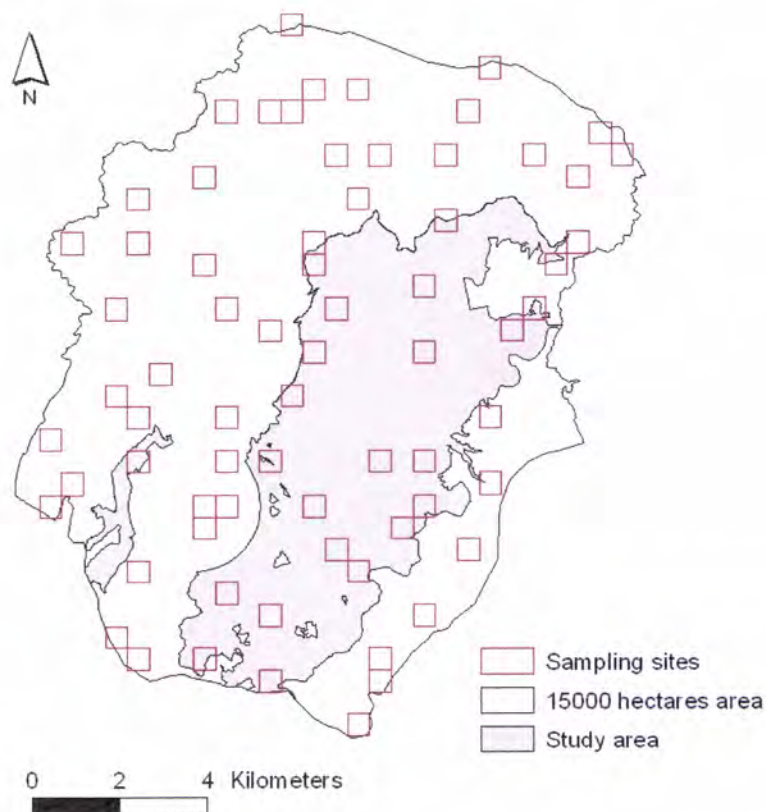


Figure 4 – Location of the sampling sites in the 15 000 hectares area.

As we considered important to evaluate the differences on rabbit abundance and presence between areas where we have improved habitat, according to the rabbit requirements, and areas where no management actions were done, several comparisons were performed. For each sampling period, differences between rabbit mean abundance, inside and outside the managed area, were tested using the non parametric Mann-Whitney Test. The differences in proportion of presences were evaluated using Pearson Chi-square Test. Differences between rabbit mean abundance obtained in the two sampling periods were also tested using the non parametric Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test. Two different comparisons were performed separately, one for the sampling sites inside our study area and one for the sampling sites located outside this area. All tests were done in SPSS 16.0 (SPSS, 2007).

Results

Rabbit Abundance

In 2007, the rabbit mean relative abundance was 4.130 latrines per kilometre and the abundance estimated reached, in one of the sampled sites, a maximum of 34.506 latrines/Km. In the 2008 sampling, the maximum value of abundance obtained, was 102.726 latrines/km and the mean value calculated for the 24 sampling sites was 12.624 latrines/km. In 2009, the mean and maximum values of wild rabbit relative abundance were, respectively, 20.166 and 123.774 latrines per kilometre.

As we can conclude, by the analysis of the Figure 5, the tendency was, clearly, to an increase on rabbit abundance, and the Wilcoxon Test showed that the augmentation, that occurred between 2007 and 2009 samples, was significant for $P < 0,05$ ($Z = - 2.547$; $P = 0.011$).

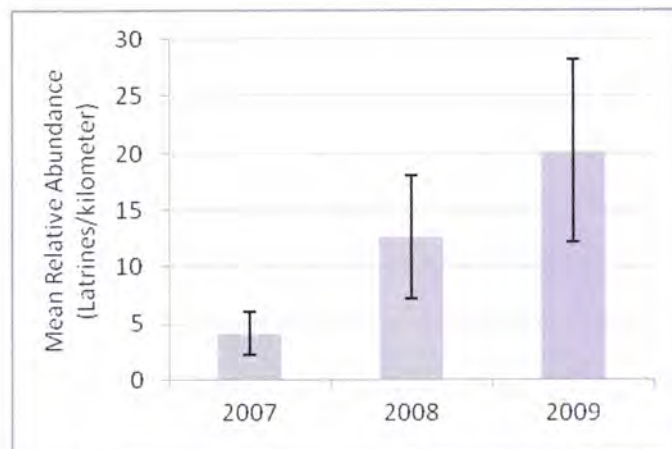


Figure 5 – Rabbit relative abundance mean value (Latrines/Kilometre) obtained in each sampling period: June 2007, June 2008 and June 2009.

The cartography of rabbit relative abundance, for all study area and for each year, obtained through IDW is presented in figures 6 to 8. We used the same classes of relative abundance in order to increase comparability among maps. The darker colours correspond to higher abundance areas.

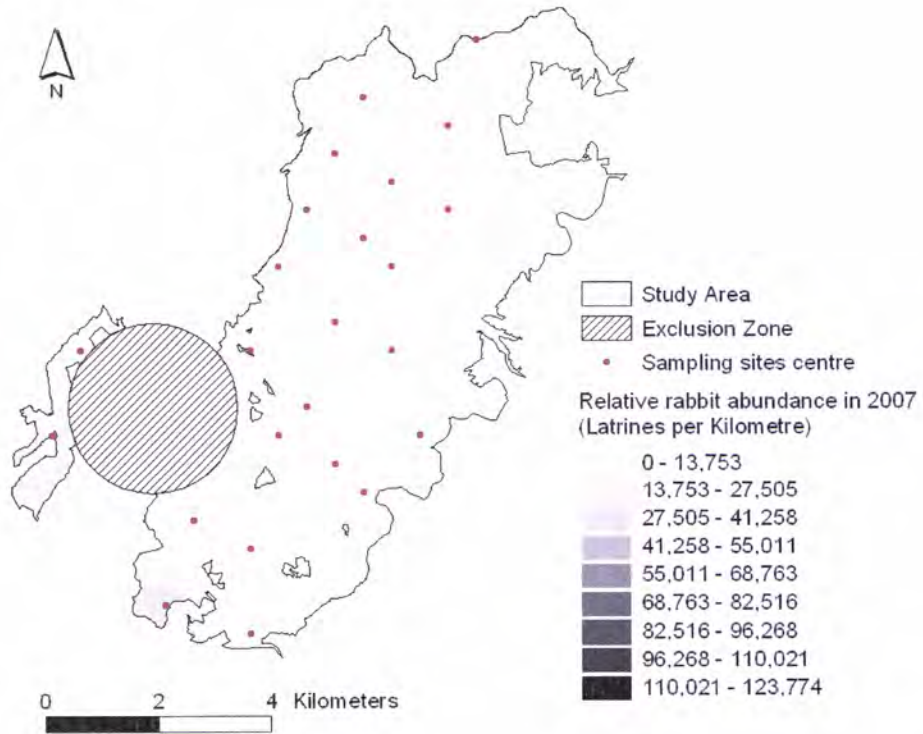


Figure 6 – Wild rabbit spatial distribution and abundance in the study area in June 2007, expressed as number of latrines per kilometre.

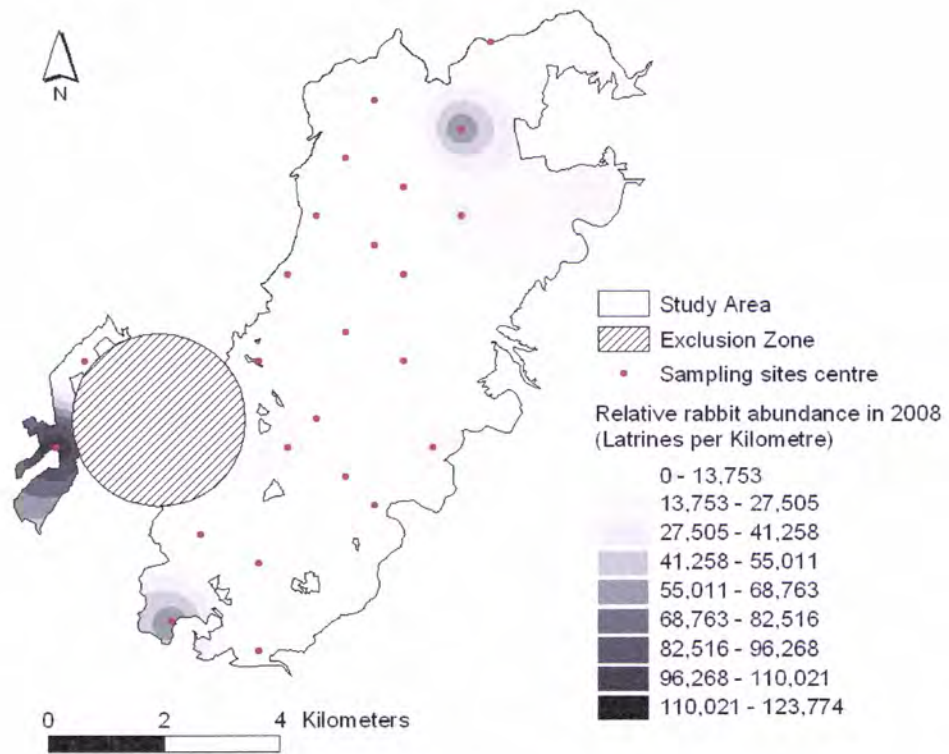


Figure 7 – Wild rabbit spatial distribution and abundance in the study area in June 2008, expressed as number of latrines per kilometre.

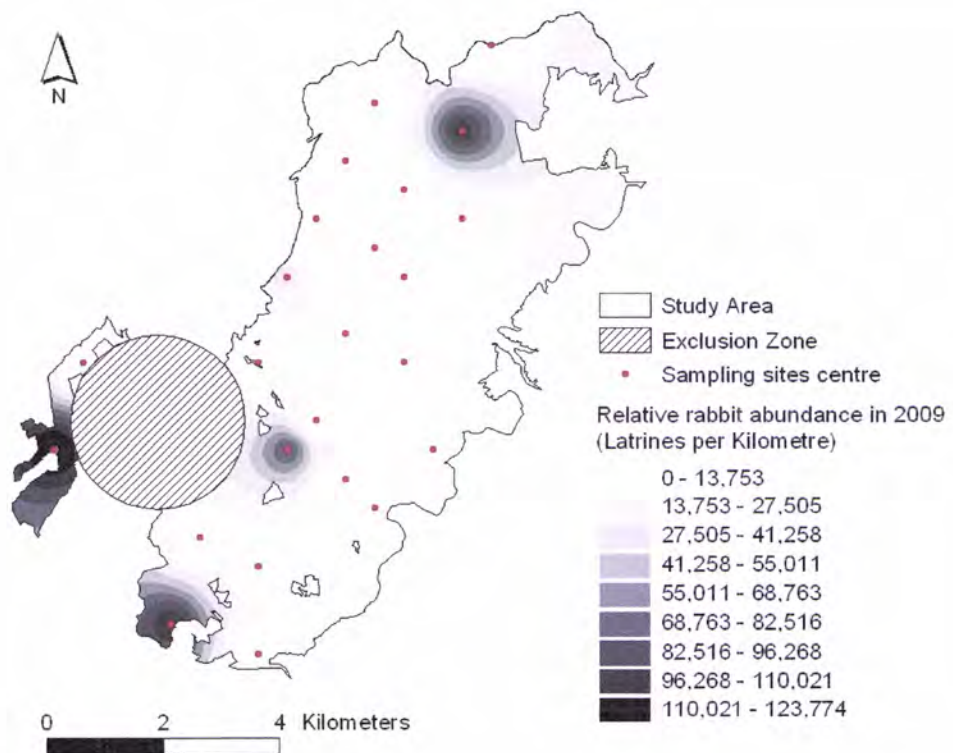


Figure 8 – Wild rabbit spatial distribution and abundance in the study area in June 2009, expressed as number of latrines per kilometre.

The three previous maps show a gradual enhancing on rabbit abundance in some points where it was initially very low, particularly in the Southwest and Northeast zones of the study area. This tendency was clearer in 2008, after the implementation of the habitat improvement measures. We can observe, as well, the formation of new a nucleus of the species in the centre of the area. Despite the increase on rabbit abundance and the appearance of new a nucleus, its distribution is still very dispersed and localised and the species have very low or null abundances in large part of the study area.

Models of rabbit occurrence

The species occurred in 25.0% of the sites sampled in June 2007, in 33.3% of the sites sampled in June 2008 and in 37.5% of the sites sampled in June 2009. Moran's I revealed that there is no significant spatial autocorrelation on the presence/absence data of 2007 ($I = -0.0324939$; $Z = 0.189724$), 2008 ($I = -0.0420285$; $Z = -0.430948$) or 2009 ($I = -0.0778349$; $Z = -0.593419$).

A summary of the models obtained by the univariate logistic regression analysis is presented in table 2, one for each sampled year: 2007, 2008 and 2009. Only the significant results ($P < 0.25$) are presented. Univariate analysis did not reveal any significant unimodal effect for any of the explanatory variable tested.

As we can see, in 2007, the probability of occurrence of rabbit was positively influenced by the proportion of areas oriented West ("P_W") and the number of altitude contour lines ("N_Cont"), an indicator of the slope variation, and decreased significantly with the proportion of areas occupied by riparian vegetation ("P_RipVeg").

In June 2008, the presence of rabbit increased significantly with the proportion of open areas ("P_Open"), with the perimeter of ecotone ("Ecot_Per") and with the proportion of areas with slope lower than 15° ("Slope"), and was negatively influenced by proportion of areas oriented East ("P_E"), by the mean patch size ("MPS"), by the distance to the nearest drinking trough ("Dist_DriT") and by distance to the nearest water reservoir ("Dist_Wres"). The proportion of areas with slope lower than 15° ("Slope") was eliminated from further analysis, as it was significantly correlated ($r > 0,7$) with the proportion of open areas ("P_Open"). This last variable was partially controlled and has changed with the implementation of habitat improvement actions, so we opted to keep it in detriment of "Slope". In 2009 sampling, the rabbit presence presented a positive significant relationship with perimeter of ecotone ("Ecot_Per") and the proportion of areas oriented West ("P_W") and a negative significant

relationship with the distance to the nearest water reservoir (“Dist_Wres”), with the mean patch size (“MPS”) and with the proportion of areas occupied by riparian vegetation (“P_RipVeg”).

Table 2 – Summary statistics of significant variables for each sampled year data. The mean \pm standard deviation, the significance levels (* $P < 0.25$; ** $P < 0.10$; *** $P < 0.05$) and directions of association (+, positive; -, negative) is presented for each significant variable in the univariate models. Please see table 1 for variable names and units.

Year	Independent variables	Presence	Absence	Univariate Logistic Regression
		Mean \pm S.D.	Mean \pm S.D.	
2007	P_W	0.262 \pm 0.061	0.146 \pm 0.090	(+) ***
	P_RipVeg	0.024 \pm 0.018	0.054 \pm 0.056	(-) *
	N_Cont	34.667 \pm 3.724	31.556 \pm 6.317	(+) *
2008	P_E	0.166 \pm 0.107	0.280 \pm 0.119	(-) **
	MPS	2.058 \pm 0.896	3.237 \pm 1.476	(-) **
	P_Open	0.088 \pm 0.103	0.022 \pm 0.030	(+) **
	Ecot_Per	1047.626 \pm 668.456	487.370 \pm 583.336	(+) *
	Dist_DriT	728.243 \pm 687.373	1026.521 \pm 533.823	(-) *
	Slope	0.276 \pm 0.108	0.206 \pm 0.098	(+) *
	Dist_Wres	803.438 \pm 608.331	983.975 \pm 467.309	(-) *
2009	Dist_Wres	626.818 \pm 652.427	1107.261 \pm 509.739	(-) ***
	Ecot_Per	990.975 \pm 637.716	484.010 \pm 629.469	(+) **
	P_W	0.220 \pm 0.102	0.148 \pm 0.086	(+) **
	MPS	2.226 \pm 0.978	3.215 \pm 1.575	(-) *
	P_RipVeg	0.030 \pm 0.022	0.057 \pm 0.060	(-) *

Several of the tested independent variables were changed as result of the implementation of habitat improvement measures, particularly the proportion of open areas (“P_Open”), the perimeter of ecotone (“Ecot_Per”) and the mean patch size (“MPS”). These changes were due to the crops, sowed with the objective of enhancing food availability for rabbits. The installation of drinking troughs changed the variable distance to the nearest water source (“Dist_Wat”) values for the sampling sites.

Statistical comparisons between 2007 (pre habitat management) and 2008 (post implementation of habitat management) mean values of the first three variables cited above, showed a significant difference for all of them. The trend was for an increase on the proportion of open areas and the perimeter of ecotone, and for a decrease on the mean patch size. The variable (“Dist_Wat”) didn’t change significantly with the installation of drinking

troughs, nevertheless, a slight decrease in the distance to the nearest water source was observed (Table 3).

Table 3 – Summary statistics of the variables that have changed with the habitat management actions and Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test results (Z – Test value; *P* – significance level; ****P* < 0.05; ns – not significant). Please see table 1 for variable names.

Independent variables	Mean values in 2007	Mean values in 2008	Z	P
P_Open	2.4%	4.4%	-3.4078	0.000655***
Ecot_Per	351.3 m	674.1 m	-3.36	0.000776***
MPS	3.273 ha	2.844 ha	-3.01	0.002611***
Dist_Wat	163.293 m	161.117 m	-1.000	0.317 ns

The three multivariate logistic models, relating presence/absence of wild rabbit with environmental descriptors, are presented in tables 4 to 6, accordingly to the sampling period to which they refer. For each year, several models were obtained (please see appendix I), however, the model with the smallest AIC with all variables significant (*P* < 0.10) was considered the best model (Burnham & Anderson, 2002).

Table 4 – Multivariate logistic model for 2007 data (AIC = 22.211) (β – Regression coefficients; *P* – significant level; ***P* < 0.05). Please see table 1 for variable names.

Equation term	β	<i>P</i>
(Intercept)	-5.998	0.0292 **
P_W	22.452	0.0415 **

Table 5 – Multivariate logistic model for 2008 data (AIC = 26.209) (β – Regression coefficients; *P* – significant levels; ***P* < 0.05; **P* < 0.10). Please see table 1 for variable names.

Equation term	β	<i>P</i>
(Intercept)	7.061	0.0409 **
MPS	-10.123	0.0579 *
P_E	-10.703	0.0540 *

Table 6 – Multivariate logistic model for 2009 data (AIC = 26.209) (β – Regression coefficients; *P* – significant levels; ***P* < 0.05; **P* < 0.10; ns – not significant). Please see table 1 for variable names.

Equation term	β	<i>P</i>
(Intercept)	2.454	0.3416 ns
MPS	-11.068	0.0601 *
P_W	15.794	0.0406 **

In 2007 sampling, rabbit presence was related only to the proportion of areas oriented west ("P_W"); in 2008, rabbit presence was negatively influenced by the mean patch size ("MPS") and by the proportion of areas oriented east; and in 2009, rabbit presence was simultaneous influenced negatively by the mean patch size and positively by the proportion of areas oriented west.

Intervention VS Non intervention

In 2007, the rabbit mean relative abundance was 1.366 latrines per kilometre and the species was present in 22% of transects outside the managed site. In the intervention area, rabbit occurred in 15% of the sampled sites and the mean relative abundance was 1.230 latrines per kilometre. In 2009 sampling, the species was present in 30% of the sampling sites located outside the managed area and in 40% of the sampling sites located inside this area. Concerning rabbit abundance the mean values outside and inside the managed site were, respectively 8.142 and 10.273 latrines per kilometre.

Figures, 9 and 10, show a clear increase on rabbit presence and abundance in both managed and non-managed areas, this being higher inside the intervention area.

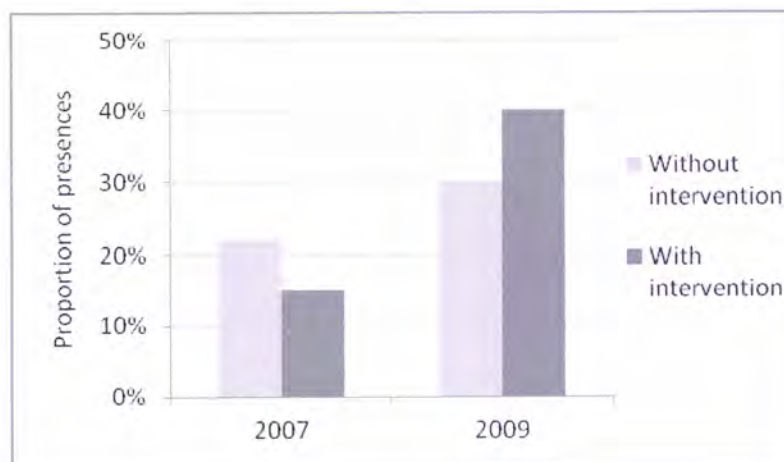


Figure 9 - Proportion of plots with rabbit in each sampling period, inside and outside the managed area.

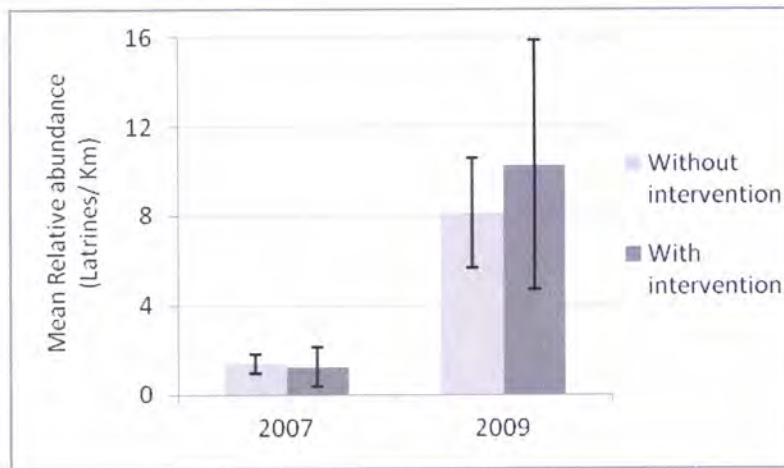


Figure 10- Mean rabbit relative abundance (Latrines/Km), in each sampling period, inside and outside the managed area.

However, for both sampling periods, the Mann-Whitney Test, for rabbit mean abundance (2007 sampling – $Z = -0.623$; $P = 0.533$; 2009 sampling – $Z = -0.654$; $P = 0.513$), and the Pearson Chi-square for the proportion of presences (2007 sampling - $\chi^2 = 0.438$, $df = 1$, $P = 0.508$; 2009 sampling - $\chi^2 = 0.648$, $df = 1$, $P = 0.421$), didn't show any significant differences between the two areas.

Although differences were not significant, the increase was clearly higher in sampling plots located in the intervention area. In terms of mean abundance, the increase was of 496% in sampling sites with no intervention and of 735% in sampling sites with intervention. Rabbit occurrence was 167% higher in the managed area and only 36% higher outside this area.

In the managed area, the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test showed that the rabbit mean relative abundance was significantly higher in the final sampling, after the implementation of habitat management actions ($Z = -2.100$; $P = 0.036$), compared with relative abundance registered in the initial sampling. On the other hand, for the sampling plots located outside the study area, although the tendency was also to an increase, the differences were not significant ($Z = -1.414$; $P = 0.157$).

Discussion

In this study we applied an indirect method, detection of field signs, to access rabbit occurrence and abundance. Several authors support the use of more accurate methods, like rabbit direct counts to evaluate rabbit distribution (e.g. Moreno *et al.*, 1996; Moller *et al.*,

1997; Villafuerte & Moreno, 1997; Gibb & Fitzgerald, 1998; Martins *et al.*, 2003; Poole *et al.*, 2003; Katona *et al.*, 2004; Delibes-Mateos *et al.*, 2007; Williams *et al.*, 2007; Barrio *et al.*, 2009), but in this study area, this method was not feasible due to lower initial abundances of rabbit and dense scrub vegetation which makes difficult rabbit direct observations (Beja *et al.*, 2007). On the other hand, 24 sampling sites could be considered a small sample size to apply the statistical methods; nevertheless, we obtained statistically significant and very meaningful results.

In the beginning of this work the rabbit abundance in the study area was very low and the distribution was localised. Along the three sampling periods, we observed a significant increment on rabbit abundance and on the number of presences that, as we hypothesised, could be related to changes in habitat suitability for rabbits due to the implementation of management actions. Despite this gradual enhancing on abundance and the creation of new nuclei, rabbit distribution is still localised and fragmented. The study area has vast forests of eucalyptus (Palma *et al.*, 2005; ICN, 2006a; ICN, 2006b), planted for commercial use, which have poor habitat conditions (low shrub cover for shelters and low availability of grassy areas for food) (Duarte, 2003; Virgós *et al.*, 2003; Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Carvalho & Gomes, 2004; Monzón *et al.*, 2004). These forests, as well as the abrupt valleys (CNA, 1982), characteristics of mountainous areas, are natural barriers that prevent rabbit dispersion and decreases connectivity among rabbit nuclei. Virgós *et al.* (2003), in a study that took place in central Spain, also referred the importance of steep topography and patchy distribution of habitat as two of the main reasons that hinder rabbit movements between neighbouring populations and, therefore, avoid the natural repopulation of suitable empty habitats.

The statistical univariate analysis that we performed proved to be quite useful since it allowed us to evaluate the relative importance of each landscape and topographic descriptor on rabbit presence in the three sampling periods: June 2007, June 2008 and June 2009.

Also important to note is the fact that some of the explanatory variables, changed significantly after the habitat improvement actions were done, particularly the installation of pastures for food, in the end of 2007 and beginning of 2008. This means that the actions taken modified, successfully, the characteristics of the habitat in the sampled plots, creating more suitable conditions for the rabbit (e.g. Blanco & Villafuerte, 1993; Villafuerte *et al.*, 1994; Villafuerte & Moreno, 1997; Carvalho & Gomes, 2003; Duarte, 2003; Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Lombardi *et al.*, 2007). The installation of crops increased the proportion of open areas and, consequently, the availability of food in a site where the land abandonment boosted the development of dense scrub vegetation and the traditional crops are scarce (Palma *et al.*,

2005; Beja *et al.*, 2007). The installation of crops also lead to a decrease on the mean patch size and, consequently, an increase on the perimeter of ecotone, a condition, considered by several authors, as one of the most important to increase wild rabbit habitat suitability (e.g. Palomares, 2001; Angulo, 2003; Lombardi *et al.*, 2003; Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Carvalho & Gomes, 2004; Fernández, 2005). The distance to the nearest water source was a factor that only changed slightly with the installation of the drinking troughs. As we referred in the methods chapter, drinking troughs weren't installed in all initially planned places due to constraints related with their regular maintenance. Nevertheless, the proximity to the drinking troughs influenced positively the occurrence of rabbit in the 2008 sampling.

In the three sampling periods, the presence of rabbit was influenced by the area exposition. In 2007 and 2009, the species occurred especially in sampling squares mostly exposed to west and in 2008, avoided the sampling plots with high proportion of area turned east. Probably, rabbit prefers terrains with west orientation since they are more exposed to the sun and present a higher mean air temperature, due to the heating of the air masses accumulated throughout the day till sunset (North Hemisphere) (Cabral, 2003). Besides that, it is documented (e.g. Blanco & Villafuerte, 1993; Villafuerte, 2002; Duarte, 2003; Calvete *et al.*, 2004) that the wild rabbit prefers areas with smooth slope, as our results also suggest. In June 2008, the species was present in areas with slope mainly lower than 15° and in 2007 its distribution was negatively related to the increment of the number of altitude contour lines, another surrogate of slope. A higher number of altitude contour lines crossing the sampling plot correspond to higher sloping areas.

In 2007 and 2009 samplings, an avoidance of sites with higher extension of riparian vegetation, i.e. mainly watercourses located in the bottom of the valleys, was registered. This result is not supported by Virgós *et al.* (2003), Calvete *et al.* (2004), and Fernández (2005), who suggest that, in the valleys, the habitat is more suitable for the species, and that it avoids high elevation areas and prefers places near the streams, due to the proximity to water and food resources. It is known that, in Monchique, the riparian vegetation is well preserved and the watercourses retain, in some locals, a minimum water level also during summer (António Gamito and João Dimas, personal observations) maintaining high levels of humidity in the valleys and, consequently, enhancing the proliferation of mosquitoes. Accordingly to Rouco *et al.* (2006b), San Miguel-Ayaz (2006) and Wray (2006) the mosquitoes, together with the fleas, are the main vectors that transmit the virus that causes myxomatosis. Thus, in this place, probably the species adapted to avoid the valleys. This hypothesis might explain why, during the field work, we founded higher number of wild rabbit field signs in the flatter top of the

hills, than in the valleys. This means that rabbits might use water reservoirs and drinking troughs to satisfy its water needs. Our results support this hypothesis since in 2008 and 2009 the species occurred preferably near the water reservoirs and, in 2008, also preferred sites close to the drinking troughs installed through the present project. Fernández (2005) also reported the proximity to lagoons as a very important factor affecting rabbit abundance in the Doñana National and Natural Parks, in the south-western Spain.

The presence of the wild rabbit was also lower in the plots with higher mean patch size, either in 2008 either in 2009. A greater mean size of patches corresponds to a smaller number of distinct patches of habitat and, consequently, to a lower ecotone length, i.e., interspersed between shelter and food, one of the factors considered most important for this species occurrence (e.g. Palomares, 2001; Angulo, 2003; Carvalho & Gomes, 2003; Daniels *et al.*, 2003; Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Fernández, 2005). For the same reason, we detected a positive relationship between the variable “perimeter of ecotone” and the rabbit occurrence. Several authors also documented the importance of the ecotone on rabbit distribution and/or abundance. Angulo (2003) and Lombardi *et al.* (2003), two studies that took place in several regions of southern Spain, have shown that rabbit abundance was positively correlated with the density of scrubland–pastureland ecotone. Lombardi *et al.* (2007) radio-tracked thirty-five rabbits in three neighbouring areas: each characterized by the dominance of grassland, scrubland or ecotone. In the ecotone, where grass biomass and total protein availability were intermediate between grassland and scrubland, rabbits had the smallest home ranges and core areas. These authors concluded that the structure of the ecotone allows rabbits to optimize their spatial behaviour and to be able to easily access feeding and refuge patches. Moreover, the results obtained by Virgós *et al.* (2003), Monzón *et al.* (2004) and Rueda *et al.* (2008) demonstrated the importance the heterogeneity of habitats, either for adults or juveniles, in maintaining viable rabbit populations.

In several regions of its distribution, the wild rabbit uses the proximity to scrub vegetation as an anti-predatory strategy (Jaksic & Sorriquer, 1981; Moreno *et al.*, 1996), optimizing the use of the habitat, on an effort to benefit of both, food and shelter areas, where they are protected from their natural predators (Lombardi *et al.*, 2003; Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Fernández, 2005). Thus, it has been proposed that, in the Iberian Peninsula, the rabbits feed in the immediacy of the protective vegetation, frequenting the edge habitats; they stay under cover during the day, hiding from diurnal birds of prey, and forage in groups in the open plots at night, probably to better detect carnivores (e.g. Gibb, 1993; Moreno *et al.*, 1996; Villafuerte & Moreno, 1997).

In 2008, the explanatory variable “proportion of open areas” included, for the first time, the patches of crops seeded during our project habitat management actions. Our statistical analysis results showed that, the higher the proportion of open areas, i.e., areas with a larger availability of food and a longer ecotone, higher the occurrence of the wild rabbit.

In 2007 multivariate analysis, only the variable “proportion of areas oriented west” was retained in the final model, confirming that the distribution of the wild rabbit in the sampling sites was determined mainly by sun exposition. In 2008, the best model included the variables “proportion of areas oriented east” and “mean patch size”, both influencing negatively the presence of the species. In June 2009, rabbit presence was also influenced positively by the proportion of areas oriented west and negatively by the mean patch size.

In the three models, rabbit occurrence is significantly related to terrain exposition variables. Although in 2008 the variable is the opposite of the one selected in the other two sampling periods, the signs are opposite. The most relevant difference between the final models in the different years is the selection of the variable “mean path size” in 2008 and 2009, but not in 2007. This variable was significantly changed with interventions made in the framework of our project, more specifically due to the crops installation which has potentiated the expansion of the wild rabbit in the study area.

In summary, the results obtained with the statistical modelling have shown that the habitat improvement actions, particularly the installation of crops, have contributed to an increase on the rabbit distribution area. Our results also suggest that the increase on rabbit occurrence was higher in the managed area, than outside of it.

The rabbit restocking didn't seem to have contributed too much to the species distribution in the study area as the habitat improvement measures did. The rabbit abundance increased significantly inside and near the fence but the dispersion of the introduced animals, until now, was very low (Unpublished data). This result is consistent with what was observed by Gibb (1993), Calvete *et al.* (1997), Calvete & Estrada (2004) and Letty *et al.* (2005) in rabbit restocking programs in fenced areas.

Management implications and suggestions

Mediterranean ecosystems have experienced a long and intense history of human influence resulting in landscape fragmentation and degradation (Gonzalez-Bernaldez, 1991; Myers *et al.*, 2000; San Miguel-Ayanz, 2003) and Monchique is not an exception. Several factors may have led to a decrease on rabbit abundance in this place, particularly, the

epizooties, traditional land practices abandonment and the proliferation of forests of production, leading to the formation of several fragmented and isolated populations.

Our study supported the idea that the distribution and abundance of rabbit, in these three game estates, can be influenced by the habitat improvement actions. The implementation of habitat management techniques seems to have been beneficial to the rabbit population, especially through the creation of new feeding areas. The success and importance of habitat improvement measures on rabbit abundance and/or presence were also reported by other authors (e.g. Ferreira, 2003; Rouco *et al.*, 2006a).

Despite some enhancement on rabbit distribution and abundance, until now, rabbit distribution is still dispersed, and many sites with little or no rabbit signs are found in areas of apparent suitability for rabbits. The habitat fragmentation, particularly due to the existence of vast areas of eucalyptus, probably is playing a relevant role on these results because large areas of this kind will turn difficult rabbit dispersion. The solution for this would be the replacement of eucalyptus plantations by plantations of native species, although we are aware that this is a measure very difficult to implement, due to the economic importance of these production forests.

A more feasible action to take is to continue the improvement of habitat with the creation of new feeding areas in a way to create corridors of suitable habitat that connect isolated patches. Together with these habitat management actions and in order to enhance the water net, a higher number of drinking troughs should also be installed and its regular maintenance should be assured. Our results indicate, and other authors also suggest (e.g. Beja *et al.*, 2003; Daniels *et al.*, 2003; Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Fernández, 2005; Lombardi *et al.*, 2007), that a good combination of patches of scrub and pasture is vital for improving rabbit habitat. Vegetation management should aim to optimize access to scrubland and pastureland patches by generating networks of ecotones between these vegetation types. We suggest the introduction of more small-patch crops, adequate to the species, in dense and continuous scrubland areas, in order to increase the spatial heterogeneity. The opening of firebreaks, besides detaining the fire propagation, could also enhance the ecotone and later, these cleared areas, may be colonized by native herbs (pastures), providing also an extra food resource for the species. Some authors recommend doing small, prescribed fires to diversify the scrubland age structure (Moreno & Villafuerte, 1995; Ferreira, 2003). In this area we don't recommend it due to the existence of very flammable vegetation species and a sad recent history concerning fires in the region. Crops and drinking troughs should be installed

preferably in the top of the hills avoiding the humidity and mosquito proliferation that occurs in the valleys.

Additionally, small reintroductions of rabbits in some suitable areas, where the species doesn't exist, may be an interesting tool. This would reduce the distance between populations and enhance the likelihood of effective dispersal and colonization of intermediate areas. The introduced animals must come from the existing populations in the study area in order to avoid genetic and sanitary contamination (Ferreira, 2003; Guil & Moreno-Opo, 2007). The rabbits occurring inside the large fenced area, where they were reintroduced two years ago, may be an important source of animal for this small restockings. The translocation of animals is also proposed by Virgós *et al.* (2003) and San Miguel-Ayanz & Muñoz-Igualada (2006).

The participation of landowners and hunting associations in these actions is fundamental since the interventions are implemented in private properties and these stakeholders are interested in this small game species recovery.

In conclusion, the main goal of the proposed management actions will be to connect the isolated hotspots of rabbit in order to have continuous, abundant, stable and self-sustained populations, more resistant to diseases, predation and hunting pressure, benefiting not only this species but also all the predator species that depend on it.

Acknowledgments

The field work was funded by REN, SGPS and coordinated by the consortium EGSP/Ecosystema, in the ambit of the project "Compensatory measures and specific monitoring of the Odelouca's Bonelli eagle couple, as a result of the environmental impact evaluation process of the electric power line Sines-Portimão 3 to 400 kV". We are grateful to the game estates, partners of the project, for the assistance in the habitat improvement measures implementation and maintenance. Special thanks to Filipe Carvalho and Sandra Alcobia for helping on the fastidious elaboration of the study area land use map and to Helena Marques and Paula Pinheiro for helping in the field work. We also would like to thank Sónia Pina for the sent articles and, finally, to Nuno Castilho and Patrícia Encarnação for the text review.

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Appendix I

Table A 1 – Multivariate logistic models evaluated for 2007 data, ranked by the AIC value. The table indicates for each model the AIC value, the variables considered, the direction of association with rabbit presence (+, positive; -, negative) and the significance level (** $P < 0.05$; * $P < 0.10$; ns – not significant). Please see table 1 for variable names.

Models	AIC	P_W	P_RipVeg	N_Cont
1	22.211	(+) **		
2	22.582	(+) *	(-) ns	
3	22.608	(+) *	(-) ns	(+) ns
4	23.210	(+) *		(+) ns
5	28.563		(-) ns	(+) ns
6	28.579		(-) ns	
7	29.311			(+) ns

Table A 2 – Multivariate logistic models evaluated for 2008 data, ranked by the AIC value. The table indicates for each model the AIC value, the variables considered, the direction of association with rabbit presence (+, positive; -, negative) and the significance level (* $P < 0.10$; ns – not significant). Please see table 1 for variable names.

Models	AIC	P_E	MPS	Ecot_Per	Dist_DriT	P_Open	Dist_Wres
1	26.209	(-) *	(-) *				
2	27.997	(-) *	(-) *				(+) ns
3	28.185	(-) *	(-) *		(-) ns		
4	28.206	(-) ns	(-) ns			(+) ns	
5	28.208	(-) *	(-) *	(+) ns			
6	28.465					(+) *	
7	28.827	(-) ns				(+) ns	
8	29.431					(+) *	(+) ns
9	29.673	(-) *					
10	29.722		(-) ns			(+) ns	
11	29.751		(-) *				
12	29.949	(-) ns		(+) ns			
13	30.016	(-) ns				(+) ns	(+) ns
14	30.021	(-) ns		(+) ns			(+) ns
15	30.148				(-) ns	(+) ns	
16	30.407			(+) ns		(+) ns	
17	30.459			(+) *			(+) ns
18	30.667		(-) *		(-) ns		
19	30.693		(-) *				(+) ns
20	30.693		(-) ns		(-) ns		(+) ns
21	30.736				(-) *		(-) *
22	30.762	(-) ns		(+) ns		(+) ns	
23	30.801	(-) *					(+) ns
24	30.806	(-) ns			(-) ns	(+) ns	
25	30.854		(-) ns			(+) ns	(+) ns
26	30.865	(-) ns			(-) ns		(+) ns

Table A 2 – (Contd.)

Models	AIC	P_E	MPS	Ecot_Per	Dist_DrIT	P_Open	Dist_Wres
27	30.911	(-) ns			(-) ns		
28	31.099			(+) ns			
29	31.106			(+) ns		(+) ns	(+) ns
30	31.267		(-) ns		(-) ns	(+) ns	
31	31.287			(+) ns	(-) ns		(+) ns
32	31.318		(-) ns	(+) ns			
33	31.666		(-) ns	(+) ns			(+) ns
34	31.722		(-) ns	(-) ns		(+) ns	
35	31.891	(-) ns		(+) ns	(-) ns		
36	32.128			(+) ns	(-) ns	(+) ns	
37	32.195				(-) ns		
38	32.617			(+) ns	(-) ns		
39	32.637		(-) ns	(+) ns	(-) ns		
40	32.961						(+) ns
41	30.390				(-) ns	(+) ns	(+) ns

Table A 3 – Multivariate logistic models evaluated for 2009 data, ranked by the AIC value. The table indicates for each model the AIC value, the variables considered, the direction of association with rabbit presence (+, positive; -, negative) and the significance level (** $P < 0.05$; * $P < 0.10$; ns – not significant). Please see table 1 for variable names.

Model	AIC	Dist_Wres	Ecot_Per	P_W	MPS	P_RipVeg
1	28.069			(+) **	(-) *	(-) ns
2	28.326			(+) **	(-) *	
3	29.21	(-) *			(-) ns	(-) ns
4	29.478	(-) **				(-) ns
5	29.811	(-) ns		(+) ns	(-) ns	
6	30.183		(+) ns	(+) *	(-) ns	
7	30.225	(-) **				
8	30.495	(-) *			(-) ns	
9	30.56	(-) ns	(+) ns			(-) ns
10	30.837		(+) ns	(+) ns		
11	30.936	(-) ns		(+) ns		(-) ns
12	31.04		(+) ns	(+) ns		(-) ns
13	31.173	(-) ns	(+) ns			
14	31.331		(+) *			(-) ns
15	31.508		(+) *			
16	31.544	(-) ns		(+) ns		
17	31.809				(-) *	(-) ns
18	32.133	(-) ns	(+) ns	(+) ns		
19	32.144			(+) *		
20	32.219			(+) *		(-) ns
21	32.447	(-) ns	(+) ns		(-) ns	
22	32.575				(-) ns	

Table A 3 – (Contd.)

Model	AIC	Dist_Wres	Ecot_Per	P_W	MPS	P_RipVeg
23	32.583		(+) ns		(-) ns	(-) ns
24	33.116		(+) ns		(-) ns	
25	33.811					(-) ns

Considerações Finais

Este trabalho enquadra-se no âmbito da actividade “Aumento dos recursos tróficos do casal de Águia de Bonelli de Odelouca – Recuperação do Coelho-bravo”, inserida no projecto “Medidas Compensatórias e Monitorização Específica para o casal de Águia de Bonelli (*Aquila fasciata*) de Odelouca, decorrentes do processo de Avaliação de Impacte Ambiental da Linha de Alta Tensão Sines-Portimão 3 a 400 kV”. Para além das medidas de gestão de habitat implementadas e da monitorização da abundância de coelho-bravo, esta actividade envolveu outras acções que não foram contempladas nesta dissertação, entre elas, o seguimento por telemetria de alguns dos indivíduos introduzidos e o acompanhamento da mortalidade, cujos resultados serão apresentados no âmbito de outra tese de mestrado.

O principal objectivo deste trabalho foi verificar se as medidas de gestão de habitat implementadas conduziram ao incremento da abundância e distribuição de coelho-bravo na área de estudo.

A análise estatística foi realizada para as 24 quadrículas de amostragem, no entanto, e no âmbito do projecto, a partir de Junho de 2008, foram seleccionadas 15 novas quadrículas, aumentando o número de quadrículas amostradas para 40. Neste trabalho, de forma a tornar os resultados mais comparáveis, foram realizadas as modelações de presenças obtidas em cada uma das amostragens (Junho de 2007, Junho de 2008 e Junho de 2009), apenas para as 24 quadrículas iniciais. Apesar do tamanho da amostragem, obtiveram-se resultados estatisticamente significativos e relevantes.

Poderia também ter sido interessante modelar a abundância e/ou presença de coelho-bravo para as 70 quadrículas de amostragem, situadas na área intervencionada e área envolvente não intervencionada, no entanto, as duas amostragens foram realizadas em épocas do ano distintas, sendo que não seria útil nem cientificamente correcta a comparação dos resultados obtidos.

Foram executadas diversas intervenções no terreno, com o objectivo de melhorar a adequabilidade do habitat para o coelho-bravo, nomeadamente, a instalação de culturas para a fauna, de bebedouros artificiais e de abrigos artificiais (González & San Miguel, 2004; Ferreira & Sarmiento, 2006; Rouco *et al.*, 2006a). Foram instalados diferentes tipos de culturas para a fauna de forma a assegurar a diversidade e disponibilidade de alimento ao longo de todo o ano: culturas com propriedades de auto regeneração que não necessitam de intervenção anual (trevo-subterrâneo, serradela e azevém anual), pastagens de cereal (aveia,

tritical e azevém anual) e leguminosas (tremocilha). Nalguns locais mais isolados, semeou-se cereal e leguminosas em associação.

Não foi possível, no entanto, cobrir de igual forma toda a área de intervenção em termos de melhoria de habitat, como seria o ideal (González & San Miguel, 2004). No que diz respeito às culturas para a fauna, houve necessidade de ajustar, no terreno, algumas localizações, face ao declive acentuado, à pedregosidade extrema verificada e/ou às não autorizações para a intervenção por parte de alguns proprietários. Foram ainda excluídas zonas de habitat muito desfavorável para a espécie e onde não era possível a intervenção em tempo útil, como por exemplo os eucaliptais. No que respeita aos bebedouros artificiais, não foi possível instalar um número mais elevado de forma a cobrir toda a área com carência de água, uma vez que se tentou criar um compromisso entre a cobertura de toda a área de estudo e a capacidade de manutenção regular destes bebedouros.

Com os resultados obtidos neste trabalho foi possível compreender que, apesar de um aumento significativo da abundância, a dispersão de coelho progrediu de forma gradual mas lenta e é ainda um pouco fragmentada. Verificou-se ainda que as variáveis relativas à intervenção no terreno (e.g. tamanho das manchas; perímetro de orla, etc.) contribuíram significativamente para o aumento da ocorrência de coelho-bravo nas áreas intervencionadas, sendo que este aumento foi superior ao registado nas áreas envolventes, onde não foram realizadas acções de gestão no âmbito deste trabalho. Em suma, estes resultados sugerem que as acções de melhoria de habitat, particularmente a instalação de pastagens, alteraram significativamente as características do habitat nas quadrículas de amostragem, criando condições mais favoráveis para a população local de coelho-bravo (e.g. Blanco & Villafuerte, 1993; Villafuerte *et al.*, 1994; Villafuerte & Moreno, 1997; Carvalho & Gomes, 2003; Duarte, 2003; Calvete *et al.*, 2004; Lombardi *et al.*, 2007), que respondeu positivamente à implementação das mesmas.

O projecto em que se inseriu o presente estudo terminou no final de Outubro de 2009, no entanto, o crescimento gradual das populações de coelho-bravo está ainda numa fase precoce e a sua sustentabilidade futura dependerá da continuação e reforço de uma gestão activa do habitat e dos núcleos já estabelecidos. Desta forma, está a ser preparada uma proposta para a continuação dos trabalhos. Face aos resultados de outros projectos, onde os insucessos têm sido frequentes, é fundamental a continuação da implementação e do acompanhamento detalhado das acções de gestão e a monitorização das populações de coelho, de modo a assegurar uma gestão adaptativa que permita antecipar problemas e actuar precocemente na sua resolução.

A continuidade da recuperação do coelho-bravo na área de estudo deverá considerar o facto de existirem áreas extensas onde a intervenção ao nível do habitat não será, de momento, viável (e.g. florestas de crescimento rápido) (Palma *et al.*, 2005; ICN, 2006a; ICN, 2006b). Nestas circunstâncias, acções de gestão mais intensiva deverão ocorrer em corredores de habitat favorável, criteriosamente seleccionados, que liguem os principais núcleos de coelho já estabelecidos. A actual área de intervenção é limitada e seria desejável expandir-se para áreas limítrofes com a implementação de acções semelhantes às efectuadas na primeira fase do projecto.

As populações de coelho do cercado de habituação constituem um recurso valioso para a gestão da espécie em toda a área de estudo. A translocação de alguns animais para locais-chave, ajudando na dispersão, poderá acelerar significativamente o processo de recuperação da espécie (Virgós *et al.*, 2003).

Uma monitorização detalhada das abundâncias de predadores, particularmente das espécies menos comuns ou mais ameaçadas, poderá ser um indicador complementar do sucesso global do projecto de recuperação de coelho.

Previsivelmente, o crescimento das populações de coelho traduzir-se-á ainda num aumento da pressão social com vista à sua exploração cinegética de uma forma mais generalizada e intensiva. Esta situação deverá ser acautelada promovendo planos de exploração cinegética definidos de forma consensual com as associações de caçadores. Para além disso, a participação destas associações, bem como dos proprietários dos terrenos nas acções de gestão, é fundamental para assegurar o sucesso das mesmas.

Em conclusão, com base nos resultados obtidos no presente estudo, o objectivo das novas medidas propostas, será promover a continuação do aumento das abundâncias e da área de distribuição do coelho-bravo, de forma a interligar os núcleos isolados, contribuindo para a formação de populações contínuas e estáveis, previsivelmente mais resistentes às doenças, à predação e à pressão cinegética, beneficiando também as espécies de predadores que delas dependem.

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