

Setting the scene

The European rabbit originated in Spain and southern France and domesticated rabbits arrived in Australia with the first fleet. The first feral populations were in south-eastern Tasmania where they numbered in the thousands on some estates by 1827. The first person to introduce rabbits to mainland Australia was Thomas Austin, a member of the Victorian Acclimatisation Society and enthusiastic game hunter. 24 rabbits were brought from England onto his property 'Barwon Park', near Geelong, in 1859. By 1886 rabbits had spread north as far as the Queensland - New South Wales border and by 1900 they had reached Western Australia and the Northern Territory. The rate of spread of the rabbit in Australia was the fastest of any colonising mammal anywhere in the world.

In the past, Australians have attempted many methods of controlling rabbit numbers. Some techniques have greatly reduced rabbit numbers others have had limited success or have even contributed to the pest problem.



What to do

Read through the below list and answer the following question:

Past and present methods of eradicating rabbits include:

- ▶ poison baiting (ground and aerial)
- ▶ trapping (cage)
- ▶ rabbit proof fencing
- ▶ shooting
- ▶ ferreting
- ▶ hunting
- ▶ snaring
- ▶ scaring (using noise and visual disturbances)
- ▶ releasing rabbit predators such as foxes
- ▶ fumigating of warrens
- ▶ destruction of warrens using rippers and ploughs mounted on tractors and bulldozers
- ▶ blasting of warrens using explosives
- ▶ biological control using myxomatosis
- ▶ biological control using rabbit haemorrhagic disease virus (also known as calicivirus)
- ▶ introduction of imported fleas to encourage the spread of disease amongst rabbits



Question

With all of the above methods used to control rabbit numbers why have we not been successful in eradicating the rabbit from mainland Australia?

Respond to the above question with an 1000 word essay.

Address the following in your response:

- ▶ pest characteristics of the rabbit (diet, reproduction, survival rates, preferred habitat, dispersal rate, adaptability, predators)
- ▶ community awareness and education (rabbits portrayed in popular culture — the Easter Bunny, Bugs Bunny)
- ▶ community / stakeholder cooperation
- ▶ the rabbit viewed as a resource
- ▶ attitudes of indigenous people towards rabbits
- ▶ economic impact
- ▶ environmental impact / habitat change (soil erosion)
- ▶ reported impact of rabbits on native wildlife
- ▶ available control methods
- ▶ cost of applying control methods

A small icon of a stylized eye, looking towards the right.

Feral fact

In the 1800s settlers had a very different attitude towards many of the animals we consider pests today. Acclimatisation societies were established to introduce exotic plants and animals to Australia in an attempt to appease home sick settlers and to replicate familiar and comforting environments. Acclimatisation societies worked enthusiastically to spread the world's 'useful and bountiful' species and by 1880 more than 60 species of vertebrate animals were introduced to Australia. Fortunately, many introductions failed but others have prospered and are now considered serious pests.