I'm gonna catch me a rabbit

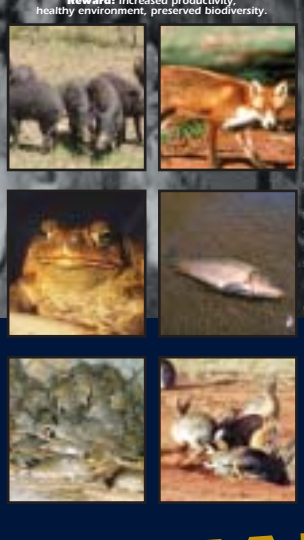
Rabbits swarming around waterholes like a seething carpet of brown fur.

Jack Meehan, from the Yandama Bore camp in South Australia, with a good load of rabbits (1958).

Photo by Jeff Corke

NOT WANTED!

Reward: Increased productivity, healthy environment, preserved biodiversity.



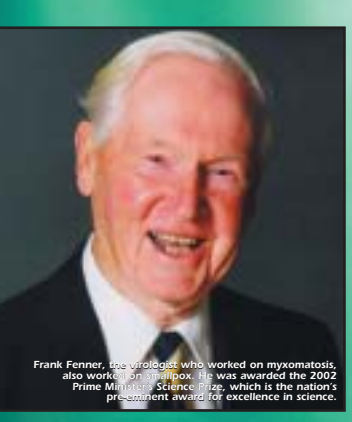
Photos courtesy of Pest Animal Control Cooperative Research Centre

*European rabbits became a pest, then a **plague** and a personal enemy to Australian farmers after being introduced for sport in 1859.*

Burrowing through pastoral and cropping land, they stripped bushes of leaves and bark and left the environment vulnerable to erosion.

The population was initially kept in check by trapping, shooting, baiting, poisoning and gassing. With no natural predator though, they reached plague proportions. Something had to be done.

EUREKA!



Frank Fenner, the virologist who worked on myxomatosis, also worked on smallpox. He was awarded the 2002 Prime Minister's Science Prize, which is the nation's pre-eminent award for excellence in science.

Frank Fenner was the virologist on the team who released the **myxoma virus**, a virus specific to European rabbits, into the Murray River Valley in 1950.

Within two years the rabbit population dropped from 600 million to 100 million. There was also a subsequent increase in wool and meat production worth $68 million due to recovered pastures.

It was the first time in the world that **biological control** mechanisms had been used successfully on a mammal pest.

After myxomatosis came calicivirus in 1995 which worked particularly well in drier areas of the country.

WHAT NEXT?

Once we've controlled the rabbit, there are another 55 invasive vertebrate animal species including the fox, mouse, carp, cane toads and feral pigs.[1]

Then there are **pest plants and insects**.

Control options include the introduction of a natural enemy, the use of baits and the development of fertility control vaccines.

When concern was raised about the safety of the myxoma virus for humans, I injected two eminent colleagues of mine—Ian Clunies Ross and Macfarlane Burnet, and Burnet injected me—with the myxoma virus at a dose 100 times greater than what would be received naturally. It did us no harm.

Frank Fenner

1. Pest Animal Control Cooperative Research Centre (www.pestanimal.crc.org.au).