



Left: Old fencing on Charles Darwin Reserve, WA. Photo by Albert Wright.

Right: Annie and Ian Mayo on Ethabuka Reserve, Qld.

Letting the land breathe

For Annie and Ian Mayo, the rhythm of removing fences from the land gives over to the exhalation of untethered land.

It takes a lot to put up 84 kilometres of fencing: hundreds of kilometres of wire, thousands of wooden posts and star pickets, and countless hours of manual labour. But what does it take to remove it?

If Annie and Ian Mayo are anything to go by, it takes a great attitude, a ready smile, many months of hard, hot work – and retirement. The couple has volunteered at nine Bush Heritage reserves intermittently over the past two-and-a-half years, removing fence after fence.

But their work is not over yet. Annie and Ian have a goal.

“We want to get to a hundred kilometres,” says Annie. “Then we’ll feel like we’ve really achieved something.”

The couple first learnt to pull fences in 2015 at Ethabuka Reserve, Queensland, after driving away from their Bendigo home with camper-trailer in tow. They were headed for the long and dusty roads of the outback to explore the Australian bush and contribute to its protection.

“We started fence pulling because we wanted to volunteer, but we didn’t know what skills we could offer,” says Annie.

It didn’t take them long to get the hang of it. They soon developed a system in which one of them walks ahead to detach the wire from the posts while the other rolls up the wire. The decayed wooden posts are left behind to provide valuable habitat for insects and small reptiles, while the star pickets are usually removed.

According to William Hansen, Reserve Manager at Western Australia’s Charles Darwin Reserve where Annie and Ian pulled 7 kilometres of fencing this year, there are two main reasons to remove fences from a landscape.

“Animals – such as kangaroos, wallabies and emus, as well as some birds during flight, can be impacted or get caught up in fences – they get lacerations, especially from the barbed wire, and can be badly injured or killed.”

“Fences also inhibit migration across a landscape; animals need space to move to water and alternate food sources, or south in the hotter months and then back up north when it cools down.”

This migration is essential for maintaining healthy native animal populations. When fences restrict movement, native animals –

particularly emus, which can’t jump over fences – are forced away from the areas they need to access.

Animals are not the only ones that breathe a sigh of relief when fences are removed. Annie quotes Noongar elder Eugene Eades, a Traditional Owner from the south-west of Western Australia: “When we removed the fences, the land was able to breathe again.”

“You turn around and look at where the fence is no longer, and it’s like the landscape goes ‘ahhh’...”

On Charles Darwin, Annie and Ian led a group of volunteers in a fence pulling working bee. As a result, William now has access to a team of well-trained local volunteers who he can call on in the future for the reserve’s annual fence removal week.

“They’re good people,” says Will. “They’ve always got smiles on their faces, they know what they’re doing, and they get stuck into it.”