

# Nature lover's healing touch

Conservation is a way of life for the Bayley family as **Rueben Hale** discovers

Land and healer Luke Bayley has devoted his life to restoring country under threat from irreversible degradation. The Bayley family were willing to travel from the other side of the country to restore a precious part of the WA Outback.

Mr Bayley thinks back to the feeling he had the first time he stood on a rocky outcrop at Charles Darwin Reserve near Perenjori.

A little over five years ago he was sent with his wife Fiona and children Tanami and Banjo to rejuvenate the lands of the reserve which had suffered from years of environmental neglect.

Mr Bayley, at that time, was appointed as a land manager for the reserve by Bush Heritage Australia. But through his time at Charles Darwin, others grew to see him as a person with a rejuvenating touch with the ability to transform a depleted landscape back to what it once was. A land healer.

The young family were no strangers to the environmental movement having been involved in land conservation and protection

projects around the country for many years beforehand.

But today, as he looks out from his office where he oversees all of Bush Heritage's WA operations, the time at Charles Darwin remains front-of-mind.

He stands transfixed as the ebbs and flows of the Indian Ocean rush in and out of the Geraldton coastline, as he thinks back to those times.

The Bush Heritage story starts 25 years ago in a wild slice of the Tasmanian rainforest.

Back then former Greens leader Bob Brown sowed the seed for the land protection organisation when, as a member of the Tasmanian Parliament, he used the prize money from the Goldman Environmental Prize as a deposit to secure the two blocks of Tasmanian forests doomed to be woodchipped.

The decision had significant consequences for Australian conservation as, bit by bit, the forest blocks were bought, and in 1991 Bush Heritage was born.

Today the organisation boasts more than 70 conservation sites



Luke Bayley, partner Fiona Stewart, daughter Tanami and son Banjo enjoy a day out at Charles Darwin Reserve. Pictures: Kerry Trapnell/Kerry Trapnell

around Australia of which 14 are in WA. In the West, there are 11 Bush Heritage-owned reserves and three established partnerships in which Bush Heritage works alongside Aboriginal groups, pastoralists and private landowners, non-government and government organisations.

"Getting up high at Charles Darwin was something that I liked to do," he said. "I suppose it was having everything laid out in front of you, which was a helpful thing at a time.

"This is a place the rugged rangelands station country arrives at the gateway to farming country. When we arrived we just walked for days exploring."

Mr Bayley said the lands are important because they extend over the intersection between the southern rangelands and the northern Wheatbelt. Bush Heritage had purchased the site and started conservation work years before the family's arrival.

He said the impact of feral animals and years of poor fire management on ecosystems hosting a massive array of flora, fauna, birds and

native wildlife had left their mark.

"Charles Darwin is of global conservation importance because it sits in a transition zone between rangelands and eucalyptus woodlands," he said.

"Biological soil crusts, which are the mosses, liverworts, hornworts, fungi and lichens in the earth that act as a sponge in semi-arid landscapes, were scarce. The sandalwood foliage was little more than a tuft.

"There were erosion gullies at the break of slopes, where water would run off the granite and with nothing to slow it down it would result in total land topsoil washouts."

Bayley said he and his family spent many days and nights under the stars in a kind of "dreaming" state. The narrative of the land became as commonplace as other aspects of family life.

These days Bayley and his family live in Geraldton after he was offered a promotion to WA Reserve's operations, as well as managing the organisation's Aboriginal partnership program.