

Anne Maslin

GUNNINGRAH, NSW

ANNE MASLIN WAS a newlywed and had lived on the family farm with her husband, Charlie, for only a year when drought brought home the harsh realities of life on the land.

In 1992, one year into one of the longest droughts in Australian history, authorities ordered Anne and Charlie to destroy 3000 sheep on their 4200-hectare beef and sheep property, Gunningrah, near Bombala on the NSW South Coast.

"It was the worst week of our lives," says Anne, 54. "Even though we did it as humanely as possible, it was heartbreaking." After this, Anne and Charlie knew they had to change to save the farm. "The only thing that was certain about our rainfall was that it is uncertain," says Anne.

"We had to find a way to preserve our topsoil and conserve the water that did fall. That meant controlling our stock and healing the erosion in our creeks."

Against traditional methods, the couple decided on a maverick approach - culling stock numbers to suit the amount of feed each season, rotational grazing and introducing a herd of goats.

"People thought we were mad," says Anne, a mother of three who says her husband is the brains trust on the farm. "But goats are four-legged weed eradicators. They let us drop chemical herbicides."

They also installed a series of "leaky" dams that slow water flow, retain water previously lost and minimise erosion.

Twelve years later, profits are up and so is production. "We love the farm," says Anne.

"We live by the words of an old Kenyan motto: 'Treat the earth well. It wasn't given to you by your parents. It is lent to you by your children.'"

Faced with the devastation of a long drought, Anne and Charlie Maslin didn't give in, but set about safeguarding their topsoil and conserving water on their land.