Hundreds of years on, dreams have come true

BRITTA CAMPION

'You come out here and everything leaves you, there is calm here,' says Aboriginal elder Norma O'Hara at Mawonga Station in the Riverina, NSW

EXCLUSIVE

RICK MORTON

From the ridge line overlooking the sprawling Mawonga Station, the native grasses and paper daisies form interlocking patterns that look a lot like dot paintings.

The landscape is split by red dirt tracks worn by feral goats and from this vantage point the gouges appear as blood vessels crisscrossing the landscape.

This is the home of the Ngiyampaa Wangaaypuwan people of central NSW but for hundreds of years it has not been in their control. Today, traditional owners, including 66-year-old Norma O'Hara, will be handed back the 22,000ha station thanks to a powerful partnership between the federal government, the Indigenous Land Corporation and the Nature Conservation Trust of NSW.

"You come out here and everything leaves you, there is calm here," Ms O'Hara, from the Winangakirri Aboriginal Corporation, told *The Weekend Australian*. "My grandfather would hunt the goats out here for years and that's still the only income."

The goats, in their thousands, have made the country their own and sell for about $5 a kilogram, or between $30 and $70 an animal, when they can be trapped alongside water sources in the harsh heat of summer.

The repatriation of the land is not a native title claim. Former Labor environment minister Peter Garrett signed off on its purchase by the Indigenous Land Council in 2011. The former owner, Peter Letts, had recognised sacred rock art sites on the property and insisted it be sold to an Aboriginal group, to return it to its rightful owners.

"That was a pretty good thing he did — he knew what it meant to us," Ms O'Hara said.

When the land is handed back today at a ceremony near Hillston, it will become the largest Indigenous Protection Area in southeast Australia and, together with the adjacent Yathong and Nombinnie nature reserves, the 190,000ha forms one of the most significant patches of mallee scrub in the state.

Nature Conservation Trust of NSW conservation manager Nigel Jones said the group became involved as a condition of the funding made available under the national reserves system. The land is home to threatened flora and mallee fowl, whose nests are trampled by goats and pigs.

"We really want to facilitate the visions the traditional owners have to get out of the towns and back on the country," Mr Jones said. "Without opportunities like this, people can get stuck in the day-to-day life of being in town and not having that opportunity."

On the track to the ridge line, past the belah trees and dogwood plants whose seeds were for millennia ground up as aphrodisiacs, the land is littered with sandstone millstones used by Aborigines to grind other seeds into flour. The caves are covered in ghostly paintings of men and white and red handprints. The sites will be opened up to tours, eventually.