

## Wangari Maathai (1940-2011)

Wangari Maathai, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for peace in 2004, said “We cannot tire or give up. We owe it to the present and future generations of all species to rise up and walk.”

Wangari was born in and grew up in rural Kenya. She won a scholarship to study in the United States, getting her baccalaureate degree in biology at Mount St. Scholastica College in Kansas, her Masters in biological sciences at the University of Pittsburgh. During her stay in America, she was influenced by the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement.

Back home in Kenya, she continued her studies and became the first woman in East Africa to earn a PhD and then to become chair of her university department, the first woman to hold such a position in Kenya.

In addition to her academic career, Wangari involved herself in all the issues that concerned her. She was active in politics, working toward a more democratic Kenya. She was concerned about environmental devastation in Kenya due to deforestation. And she sought ways to develop strategies for sustainable lifestyles in the rural regions of Kenya, especially for women. The environmental devastation was particularly hard on women. It made agriculture almost impossible, it meant there was no firewood, it led to difficulties having adequate water.

Wangari Maathai, using her cultural knowledge and her expensive education, decided that reforestation offered possibilities—potential income and other resources. In 1977, she launched what came to be called the Green Belt Movement to reforest the nation. She had managed to secure funds to pay women a small stipend to plant trees. Thirty thousand women planted 30 million trees. And while they were planting, the women learned new skills and found new opportunities for their futures.

Maathai also confronted and challenged the government on issues dear to her heart. She was beaten and arrested over and over. She said in an interview for *The Economist*, “Nobody would have bothered me if all I did was to encourage women to plant trees. But I started seeing the linkages between the problems we are dealing with and the root causes of environmental degradation. And one of those root causes was misgovernance.” When the ruling party lost power in 2002, she became a member of parliament and then assistant minister of environment, natural resources and wildlife.

In 2004 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for “her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace.”

Her work continues today through the Greenbelt Movement. The trees planted by now are over 51 million in Kenya. And there are other projects in other countries today.

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