

Wangari Maathai Kenya (1940-)

The world began to hear about the Green Belt¹ Movement or tree planting movement in Kenya in the mid-1980s. With Wangari Maathai's inspiration and help, its members had already planted several million trees by then.

The Green Belt Movement started in central Kenya where Wangari Maathai spent her childhood. She remembers it as a beautiful place with clean rivers, where people were healthy and strong, and where the women had plenty of firewood and cooked healthy food for their families.

Many years later, in the early 1970s, she was surprised to find out that people in her homeland were suffering from malnutrition and did not have clean water or firewood. She set out to change that.



Wangari Maathai in 2004 shortly after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

In: Maathai, 2006

Why They Started Planting Trees

As in many other parts of the world, the basic reason for all these problems was that most of the land was now devoted to producing crops to sell to other countries (in Kenya, especially coffee). Little forest remained, and little land to grow food. No forest also meant there was no wood for cooking. Women began to feed their families fast-cooking store-bought foods instead of their traditional dishes from locally-grown foods, which require more time to cook. The result was malnutrition. In addition, many rivers had dried up because, with no forest cover, the land had lost its ability to absorb the rain. So, clean water was becoming hard to get.

When Wangari Maathai heard about the problems in her homeland, she knew—because she had studied ecology— that more trees were the solution. Trees would provide a supply of wood and then women could cook their traditional healthy foods. Trees also would provide wood for fences, and food for animals. They would provide shade and help bring back the wild animals. Finally, by protecting and improving the soil the rain would not run off and away, but would move into slowly into it to feed the rivers.

How They Organized It

At first Wangari and her helpers thought it would be enough to get trees and plant them, but they found that people did not take care of the trees. So they began to organize

¹ The trees were usually planted in long narrow "belts", thus the name Green Belt.

community groups. In these community meetings they began to talk about their problems, and to discuss their causes. They discussed possible actions they could take to solve these problems. People began to realize they could use their own knowledge and skills to help solve their problems, and that they didn't have to wait for the government or "experts" to help them.

Over the years they have worked out a system that can be replicated easily. Each new tree-planter has to attend some classes on the benefits of trees, how to plant and take care of them, and what kinds of records they have to keep. Tree-planters can earn a small amount of money for each tree they plant, if it survives at least 6 months.

From 1976, when she first introduced the idea of planting trees, Wangari Maathai did organizing, instructed people on tree planting, care, often helped plant trees. In fact, wherever she goes, she plants a tree. While she did all this, she was also doing her teaching at the University of Nairobi and raising her three children.

By the time the year 2000 came around, members of the Green Belt Movement had planted an amazing number of trees in Kenya— over thirty million. There were over 600 Kenyan Green Belt groups, involving several hundred thousand women, and many men, and these groups were managing over 6000 tree nurseries.

In 1986, the Green Belt Movement of Kenya began sharing their techniques with leaders from other countries. As a result, similar programs sprang up in a number of other countries.

Kenya's Green Belt Movement has involved mostly women because it began as a program of the NCWK (National Council of Women of Kenya). NCWK is an organization that brings together large and small women's groups all over Kenya. Wangari Maathai served for many years in NCWK (1976-87), seven of them as president.

The Problems That They Experienced

Over and over again the Movement's efforts to protect Kenya's forests caused them problems with government officials. This was because these officials liked to give away land in public forests or parks in order to get political support from people. Green Belt Movement members fought these give-aways in the newspapers, through writing letters to government officials, by planting trees, and other nonviolent means.

"Failing is not a crime. What is important is that if you fail you have the energy and the will to pull yourself up and keep going."

--Wangari Maathai
--Unbowed, p. 144

"There are opportunities in even the most difficult moments."

--Wangari Maathai
--Unbowed, p. 144

“It is often difficult to describe what life is like in an authoritarian regime. You don’t know who to trust. You worry that you, your family, or your friends will be arrested and jailed without due process. The fear of political violence or death, whether through direct assassinations or targeted “accidents” is constant.”

--Wangari Maathai

--Unbowed, p. 206

The government fought the Movement in many ways. They prevented stories about the Movement’s success from being published in Kenya. They wrote lies and negative stories about the Movement and about Wangari Mathai’s life and activities. They stopped people from speaking out by making them fearful. For example, they forced dissenters from their jobs (especially when they were civil servants or in the University). Government officials were sent to monitor meetings. People opposing the Government turned up dead or had “accidents.” Wangari Maathai was imprisoned various times. In 1999 she was attacked and received severe head injuries while planting trees as part of the Karura Forest giveaway protest.

She spent a period hiding in her own country. She was moved from safe-house to safe-house by people

who wanted her to remain alive, and wore a disguise whenever she went out.

It didn't help that many people, especially men, saw her as a "bad example" for other Kenyan women. Even women friends and supporters were sometimes critical of her independence and outspokenness, and they complained that her activities were causing them trouble at home (with their husbands).

From Tree-planting to Politics

The threats and abuse that Wangari and her supporters suffered when trying to defend Kenya's forests showed them the importance of democratic government. Discussion meetings for members eventually came to include issues of democracy, human rights, gender, power, and culture. Thus, what was initially a tree-planting program became much more.

Wangari Maathai has also been an important leader in the pro-democracy movement in Kenya. Over and over again through her actions she has demonstrated how democracy should work, organizing citizens to speak up and ask the government officials to do what is right for the people rather than enriching themselves.

In response to the ethnic violence in central Kenya in 1993, Maathai helped organize seminars in places where violence had happened or was about to happen. She and her helpers begged people not to become violent because it would give the government an excuse to “restore order.” They repeatedly risked their lives to travel to these meetings. In her autobiography, *Unbowed*, Wangari Maathai speaks of how politicians use ethnicity to divide Africans. In Kenya the government-appointed village chiefs were used to organize violent acts so they would seem to be ethnically motivated. She says “I do not believe that people who have lived as neighbors for hundreds of years start attacking and killing one another with no provocation or support from those in power.” (p. 236)

The pro-democracy movement also worked for peace by leading “teach-ins” and seminars before elections. These were attended at times by hundreds of people, and their purpose was to raise Kenyans’ awareness about the importance of voting. They urged

people to choose representatives who would work for all Kenyans rather than only their own ethnic group. They brought leaders and politicians to these seminars in church halls so local people were able to question them and to learn to voice their needs and concerns.

In spite of the many obstacles put in Wangari Maathai's way, she was elected to Parliament in 2002 with 98% of the vote. In 2003, she became Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources, and Wildlife.

Wangari Maathai has received many awards for her work, but perhaps the most notable is the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2004. Although at least 6 African men have received this prize, she is the first African woman to receive it.

In her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, Wangari Maathai described peace as a three-legged stool. The legs are: good governance, equity for all citizens, and sustainable management of resources. As she has learned through hard experience, where one of these three "legs" is missing, the stool—peace — will fall.

References and Further Reading

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Describes several examples of places where planting trees has brought back moisture.

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Wikipedia *Wangari Maathai* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wangari_Maathai

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Nobelprize.org website *Wangari Maathai Biography*

http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2004/maathai-bio.html (Accessed 1/28/2008)

From *Les Prix Nobel. The Nobel Prizes 2004*, Editor Tore Frängsmyr, [Nobel Foundation], Stockholm, 2005 and *Les Prix Nobel/Nobel Lectures*. This site lists her many accomplishments and awards, and outlines the history of the Green Belt movement.

Discussion or Essay Questions

When you talk or write, please try to use some of the new words you have learned in this reading. If you have noticed new grammatical structures, try to use them, too.

1. When you see a tree, what do you notice first about it?
2. What is the most important benefit of trees in your opinion? Explain.

3. Based on this story, name five factors that could be critical to the success of a project such as the tree-planting project. (Assume that a successful project is one that tends to grow and affect more and more people.)
3. "Desertification" is a word describing how a place becomes drier and drier. (A desert is a place with no or very little water.) The question is: Do you know of a place where water scarcity is a problem? Explain how you learned about it, what is happening, and what is or can be done about it. If you can find it, Fukuoka's book is a very good one to look at.
4. Have you ever visited or written a letter to a government office, newspaper or government official? Explain why and what happened as a result. Or, if you haven't ever done these things, explain why.

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