

# Planting Trees in Kenya

A Conversation with Peace Prize Winner Wangari Maathai

From NewsHour with Jim Lehrer

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Wangari Maathai, photograph courtesy of Brigitte Lacombe

"I would like to call on young people, in particular, to take inspiration from this prize. Despite all the constraints that they face, there is hope in the future in serving the common good. What my experiences have taught me is that service to others has its own special rewards."

*From the statement by Wangari Maathai on winning the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize award.*

**JEFFREY BROWN (JB):** Thirty years ago, Wangari Maathai had a simple idea: To plant trees. It was a response to a growing problem affecting the lives of the poor in her native Kenya and many other areas of Africa and the developing world: The destruction of forests, soil erosion, water shortages and other types of environmental degradation.

Maathai had won a scholarship to attend college in the U.S. and earned a doctorate in biology in Kenya. In the '70s, she founded the Green Belt Movement, working with mostly poor, rural women, who were given a small stipend to plant saplings of native species.

She frequently led fights against state-backed land development and government corruption, and was once called a "mad woman" by Daniel Arap Moi, who ruled Kenya for more than two decades. Several times, she was beaten or arrested. But her movement has led to the planting of some 30 million trees, provided jobs and income to thousands of women, and reached into other parts of Africa and the world. In early December [2004] in a ceremony in Oslo, Norway, the 64-year-old Maathai became the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. We spoke during a recent visit to New York.

When your name was first announced, some people wondered why an environmentalist should win the peace prize. What's the connection between the environment and peace?

**WANGARI MAATHAI (WM):** Well, it's not surprising that people ask those questions, because this is not the normal area that the Norwegian Nobel Committee looks at. But it is, indeed, a very important shift that they made, because when you look at the world, what do... people fight over?

They are fighting over water. They are fighting over land. They are fighting over grazing ground, farming land. They are fighting over resources. And so managing these resources, which are limited on this planet, is very, very important. Sharing them equitably, at the national level especially, is very important.

**JB:** One of the things that struck me in reading your book about the Green Belt Movement is how your work is so connected to the everyday lives of women. I'm thinking of the fact that women have to walk much further to fetch wood because the forest just isn't there anymore.

**WM:** It is important for people to understand that when I started, I did not start with that vision or with that obvious linkage that we are now celebrating.

I started simply to meet the needs of a group of rural women who were telling the women at the National Council of Women in the early '70s that they needed firewood, they needed food, they needed to stabilize their soils, they needed fencing materials, building materials, fodder for their animals.

## Planting Trees in Kenya (cont.)

In our part of the world, when the environment is degraded, when there is no firewood, when there is no water, when there is no food, it's usually the women who feel it first.

**JB:** And was there a lot of resistance to this attempt to give more power to women in your society?

**WM:** Yes. To my surprise, there was resistance. And eventually, I understood that the reason why there was resistance is because a lot of these resources were actually in the hands of a few people who were governing the country.

They were the ones who were using the timber. They were the ones who were . . . who wanted to privatize the forest. They're the ones who . . . were selling water or were controlling water. They're the ones who have the facilities in cities and urban centers.

**JB:** And this is what led you directly from the needs of the environment to the needs of democracy.

**WM:** Definitely. That's when I realized that it is very difficult to protect the environment if you have bad governance any place; that you need governments that responded to the needs of the people; that you need governments that listen to their people. But you also need people, citizens, who are sufficiently empowered not to fear their leaders, but be able to hold them accountable, to be able to demand that their environment be protected, to understand that some of our human rights are environmental rights.

You have a right to a clean and healthy environment. You have a right to clean drinking water. You have a right to fresh air, and drink and eat food that is not polluted or that is not poisoned. . . .

**JB:** You know, in every article I read about you, you're described invariably as "outspoken," as "tough." There was a quote from one of your sons who said you have "fire on the inside." Where does that come from?

**WM:** Well, I think that I am greatly inspired and I get fired also by the fact that I have had the privilege of studying in America for almost five and a half years. I internalized a lot, the need for freedom. And so, for me, it was very difficult to go home, where I wanted now to share the experience that I had in America, and face my own people trying to curtail that freedom, trying to prevent me from expressing myself, sharing what I knew and teaching what I knew.

And I guess that is the fire that comes from within. I think I very much internalized that freedom, and you can't live in America and not have that.

**JB:** From when you started to now, have you seen great changes? Do you feel that you've been effective?

**WM:** Well, I'm quite sure that I would have achieved much more in those 30 years if I had been supported by my government, if I had been given the freedom and the movement to be able to do that. But we definitely have achieved a lot. And, most of all, you are dealing with people who are empowered, who feel that they can make a change in their own lives, within their own environments and utilizing the resources that they have around them. That's really wonderful. That transformation, that feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction is really wonderful to see happening to other people.

**JB:** Wangari Maathai, congratulations again and thanks for talking to us.

**WM:** Thank you very much for having me.

### Sources

Online NewsHour. "Conversation: Prize Winner." January 25, 2005. [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/environment/jan-june05/maathai\\_1-25.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/environment/jan-june05/maathai_1-25.html) (accessed January 25, 2008).

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