



## Curriculum to Teach about Wangari Maathai

### A Profile of Wangari Maathai:

When I was a young person, I grew up in a land that was green, a land that was very pure, a land that was clean. And I remember going to a small stream very close to our homestead to fetch water and bring it to my mother. We used to drink that water straight from the river. I had this fascination with what I saw in the river. Sometimes I would see literally thousands of what looked like glass beads. I would put my little fingers around them in the hope that I would pick them and put them around my neck. But every time I tried to pick them, they disappeared. I would be there literally for hours desperately trying to pick these beads, without success.

Weeks later I would come back, and there would be these thousands of little tadpoles. They are beautiful, pitch black, and in that water they would be energetically flying around and I would try to get them. You can't hold them, they are wiggling and they are very slippery. They eventually disappeared and then the frogs came.

I never realized that the glass beads were jelly sacks of eggs or understood the three stages of frogs until I went to college and learned biology. Once I had all this knowledge about the miracle of science I came home from college to discover that the creek had dried up and my homeland was suffering much environmental damage.

–Grist Magazine 15 Feb 2005

Wangari Maathai was born in Nyeri, Kenya in 1940 to farmers in the highlands of Mount Kenya. Although it was very unusual for girls there to be educated, her older brother persuaded her parents to send her to school. She was an excellent student and eventually earned a scholarship to study in the United States. She studied Biology, graduating from the Mount St Scholastic college in Kansas in 1964. Two years later she completed her Master of Science Degree at the University of Pittsburgh. She continued her graduate studies both University of Nairobi. Many male students and faculty in Nairobi were skeptical of her studies or thought that she should not be there at all. Despite this, she earned her Ph.D. She was the first woman from East or Central Africa to do so. She then taught at the University of Nairobi and worked her way up to Associate Professor and head of the faculty for the department of Veterinary Anatomy by 1976. It was around this time that she introduced her tree planting ideas.

“The Green Belt Movement in Kenya started in 1977, when women from rural areas and urban centers, reflecting on their needs at organized forums, spoke about environmental degradation. They did not have firewood. They needed fruits to cure malnutrition in their children. They needed clean drinking water, but the pesticides and herbicides used on farms to grow cash crops polluted the water. The women talked about how, a long time ago, they did not have to spend so much time going out to collect fire wood that they lived near the forest. They spoke of how, once, they ate food that sustained their health. Now, while the food does not require much energy to grow, it does not sustain them. The women feel their families are now very weak and cannot resist diseases, that their bodies are impoverished because of an environment that is degraded. The National Council of Women, a nongovernmental organization, responded by encouraging them to plant trees. In the beginning it was difficult because the women felt that they had neither the knowledge, the technology, nor the capital to

do this. But, we quickly showed them that we did not need all of that to plant trees, which made the tree-planting process a wonderful symbol of hope. Tree planting empowered these women because it was not a complicated thing. It was something that they could do and see the results of. They could, by their own actions, improve the quality of their lives.”

—from *Speak Truth to Power*, May 4, 2000

As the tree-planting spread, and the Green Belt Movement developed, rural women organized themselves into groups to address their own problems. This made the government at that time nervous because they did not have control over these groups and did not know why they were organizing. Wangari Maathai and others realized that they needed to create more democracy in order to keep doing what they were doing. This is how a tree planting movement became a pro-democracy movement.

During the 1980s, Wangari Maathai protested against the government of President Daniel Arap Moi. She became known as a troublemaker for speaking out. The president called her a "mad woman," and "a threat to the order and security of the country."

Her husband apparently agreed. They divorced during this time, and he is reported to have said she was "too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn and too hard to control".

In 1989, the president planned to take over Uhuru Park, the only park left in Nairobi, to build a sixty-two-story skyscraper. Not only would it displace the park, but he also would have borrowed lots of money from foreign investors and put the country further in debt. Wangari Maathai and others protested in the park. Police beat them. They took the case to court because they thought the project was criminal and irresponsible. They lost the court case. Eventually though, they won. Foreign investors withdrew their money because of all the protests. Following this, Parliament tried to have the Green Belt Movement banned as a subversive organization.

Wangari Maathai returned to the same park in 1992 with a group of women whose son's had been imprisoned for demanding more democratic rights. She was beaten unconscious and ended up in the hospital. The next year there were rumors that the president wanted to turn control of the government over to the army. Wangari Maathai and others released a statement in support of general elections for a change of government. The president decided to have them arrested for inciting violence. Wangari Maathai fled to her house and locked herself in it for three days before the soldiers with their guns broke into the house and took her to jail.

“This was only one of many times she was arrested during Moi's presidency. Many people in Kenya were afraid to show their support for her. Until a few years ago, people used to come up to me in the street and whisper, “I am with you and I am praying for you.“ They were so scared of being identified with me that they did not want to be heard. I know a lot of people were afraid of talking to me and being seen with me because they might be punished”.

—interview in *UNESCO Courier* 1999

Her efforts did receive some international attention as well. One time she was released from prison after a letter writing campaign from Amnesty International. Wangari Maathai ran for president against Moi in 1997, but her party withdrew her nomination on a technicality before the election took place. She continued to resist development projects that destroyed the environment without helping the ordinary people.

Karura Forest, 1,000 hectares on the outskirts of Nairobi, faced destruction for a luxury housing project. Wangari Maathai and a group of twelve women went to the gate to replant trees, along with six members of Parliament. The trees would be a symbol of the forest belonging to the public. On that morning, the police tasked with guarding the area passed their duties on to a group of 200 hired men.

The men carried whips, swords, clubs and other crude weapons. According to a Time Magazine article from December of 1998, "when she saw the force arrayed against her inside the gate...she told her group "these thugs are spoiling for trouble and the police will not protect us. Let's plant one tree outside the gate and leave."

The crowd of hired men did not want to let her plant that one tree. As she walked forward, the men charged and began beating the protestors. Many were beaten severely. Wangari Maathai was whipped in the head and knocked to the ground. Some of the other women surrounded her and they made it to a car. They went to a nearby police station. As she had predicted, the police were not very interested in investigating the incident. Maathai insisted on filing a police report though. She signed it with the blood from her head wound before being taken to the hospital. She remained in the hospital for several days, stating "as soon as I recover, I shall return to Karura Forest, even if they bury me there."

After many years of protesting, Wangari Maathai finally saw governmental change in 2002, when Mwai Kibaki defeated Moi and became the president. Maathai herself was elected to Parliament with an overwhelming 98% of the vote for her district. Kibaki named her Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife in January 2003.

Wangari Maathai received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. The Nobel committee explained:

Peace on earth depends on our ability to secure our living environment. Maathai stands at the front of the fight to promote ecologically viable social, economic and cultural development in Kenya and in Africa. She has taken a holistic approach to sustainable development that embraces democracy, human rights and women's rights in particular. She thinks globally and acts locally.

To date, the Green Belt Movement has planted about 30 million trees in Kenya.

#### Timeline:

- 1940 Born in Nyeri, Kenya, the daughter of farmers in the highlands of Mount Kenya
- As a child, she was sent to school only after her older brother pressured her parents. She excelled at school and eventually earned a scholarship to study in the U.S.
- 1964 Degree in Biological Sciences Mount St. Scholastica College, Atkinson, Kansas
- 1966 Master of Science degree from University of Pittsburgh
- 1971 Ph.D. from University of Nairobi
- 1976 Becomes chair of department of veterinary anatomy at University of Nairobi
- Introduces her tree planting concept to ordinary citizens, this develops into Green Belt movement
- 1977 Becomes associate professor at University of Nairobi
- 1980s Divorced from husband who described her as "too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn and too hard to control"
- Imprisoned multiple times for demanding multi-party elections and an end to political corruption and tribal politics
- 1992 Beaten unconscious by police during a hunger strike
- 1999 Whipped on the head and arrested while trying to plant saplings to replace trees felled by property developers
- 2002 Elected to Parliament with overwhelming 98% of the vote and appointed as Deputy Minister for the Environment
- 2004 Wins Nobel Peace Prize

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Africa. She has taken a holistic approach to sustainable development that embraces democracy, human rights and women's rights in particular. She thinks globally and acts locally.”

– The Nobel Committee

“It is evident that many wars are fought over resources which are now becoming increasingly scarce. If we conserved our resources better, fighting over them would not then occur...so, protecting the global environment is directly related to securing peace...those of us who understand the complex concept of the environment have the burden to act. We must not tire, we must not give up, we must persist.”

– Upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize

“As I continue to plant trees, and to protect those that are standing, I try to remember that victims of human rights reflect our human values as a civilized society. Since we claim that we are civil, we can make our world a better place for all mankind. In the meantime, it is important to remember that while the rest of the species on the planet can survive without us, we cannot survive without them. Respecting the rule of Nature is equally important. As I have said elsewhere, Nature is unforgiving so let us work with her for our own good. In ensuring the survival of other species and respecting their right to be, we ensure our own survival.”

– Address to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, June 19, 2006

### **Curriculum Vitae\***

Wangari Muta Maathai, PhD, EBS

Personal

Date of birth: April 1, 1940

Nationality: Kenyan

Family: Three children (Waweru, Wanjira and Muta)

### Education

PhD, Anatomy, University of Nairobi (1971)

MS, Biological Sciences, University of Pittsburgh (1966)

BS, Biology, Mount St. Scholastica College, USA (1964)

### Personal Achievements

Director, Kenya Red Cross (1973–1980)

Founder and Coordinator, The Green Belt Movement (1977–2002)

Founding member, GROOTS International (1985)

Member of Parliament, Tetu Constituency, Republic of Kenya (2002–Present)

Assistant Minister, Environment, Natural Resources & Wildlife, Republic of Kenya (2003–Present)

### Academic Appointments

Chair, Department of Veterinary Anatomy, University of Nairobi (1976)

Assoc. Professor, Department of Veterinary Anatomy, University of Nairobi (1977)

Endowed Chair in Gender & Women's Studies named “Fuller-Maathai”, Connecticut College (2000)

Montgomery Fellow, Dartmouth College, USA (2001)

Dorothy McCluskey Visiting Fellow for Conservation, Yale University, USA (2002)

### Professional Affiliations

Member, United Nations Advisory Board on Disarmament, USA

Member, UN Commission on Global Governance, USA

Member, Advisory Board, Democracy Coalition Project, USA  
Member, Earth Charter Commission, USA  
Selection Committee, Sasakawa Environmental Prize, UNEP, KENYA  
Board Member, Women and Environment Development Organization (WEDO), USA  
Board Member, World Learning for International Development, USA  
Board Member, Green Cross International  
Board Member, Environment Liaison Center International, KENYA  
Board Member, the WorldWIDE Network of Women in Environmental Work, USA  
Board Member, National Council of Women of Kenya, KENYA  
Honorary Degrees  
Doctor of Law, Yale University (2004)  
Doctor of Agriculture, University of Norway (1997)  
Doctor of Science, Hobart & William Smith Colleges (1994)  
Doctor of Law, William's college, MA USA (1990)

#### Awards

2004 Nobel Peace Prize  
2004 Sophie Prize  
2004 Petra Kelly Environment Prize  
2004 J. Sterling Morton Award  
2004 Conservation Scientist Award  
2003 Elder of the Burning Spear, Republic of Kenya  
2003 WANGO Environment Award  
2002 Outstanding Vision and Commitment Award, Bridges to Community  
2001 Excellence Award, Kenyan Community Abroad  
2001 The Juliet Hollister Award  
1997 One of 100 in the world who've made a difference in environment, Earth Times  
1995 International Women's Hall of Fame  
1994 The Golden Ark Award  
1993 The Jane Adams Leadership Award  
1993 The Edinburgh Medal  
1991 UN's Africa Prize for Leadership  
1991 Global 500 Hall of Fame, United Nations Environment Program  
1991 The Goldman Environmental prize  
1990 The Offeramus Medal  
1989 The Woman of the World  
1988 The Windstar Award for the Environment  
1986 Better World Society Award  
1984 Right Livelihood Award  
1983 Woman of the year award

#### Wangari Maathai's Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Honorable Members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I stand before you and the world humbled by this recognition and uplifted by the honor of being the 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate.

As the first African woman to receive this prize, I accept it on behalf of the people of Kenya and Africa, and indeed the world. I am especially mindful of women and the girl child. I hope it will encourage them to raise their voices and take more space for leadership. I know the honor also gives a deep sense of

pride to our men, both old and young. As a mother, I appreciate the inspiration this brings to the youth and urge them to use it to pursue their dreams.

Although this prize comes to me, it acknowledges the work of countless individuals and groups across the globe. They work quietly and often without recognition to protect the environment, promote democracy, defend human rights and ensure equality between women and men. By so doing, they plant seeds of peace. I know they, too, are proud today. To all who feel represented by this prize I say use it to advance your mission and meet the high expectations the world will place on us.

This honor is also for my family, friends, partners and supporters throughout the world. All of them helped shape the vision and sustain our work, which was often accomplished under hostile conditions. I am also grateful to the people of Kenya - who remained stubbornly hopeful that democracy could be realized and their environment managed sustainably. Because of this support, I am here today to accept this great honor.

I am immensely privileged to join my fellow African Peace laureates, Presidents Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the late Chief Albert Luthuli, the late Anwar el-Sadat and the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan.

I know that African people everywhere are encouraged by this news. My fellow Africans, as we embrace this recognition, let us use it to intensify our commitment to our people, to reduce conflicts and poverty and thereby improve their quality of life. Let us embrace democratic governance, protect human rights and protect our environment. I am confident that we shall rise to the occasion. I have always believed that solutions to most of our problems must come from us. In this year's prize, the Norwegian Nobel Committee has placed the critical issue of environment and its linkage to democracy and peace before the world. For their visionary action, I am profoundly grateful. Recognizing that sustainable development, democracy and peace are indivisible is an idea whose time has come. Our work over the past 30 years has always appreciated and engaged these linkages.

My inspiration partly comes from my childhood experiences and observations of Nature in rural Kenya. It has been influenced and nurtured by the formal education I was privileged to receive in Kenya, the United States and Germany.

As I was growing up, I witnessed forests being cleared and replaced by commercial plantations, which destroyed local biodiversity and the capacity of the forests to conserve water.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

In 1977, when we started the Green Belt Movement, I was partly responding to needs identified by rural women, namely lack of firewood, clean drinking water, balanced diets, shelter and income.

Throughout Africa, women are the primary caretakers, holding significant responsibility for tilling the land and feeding their families. As a result, they are often the first to become aware of environmental damage as resources become scarce and incapable of sustaining their families.

The women we worked with recounted that unlike in the past, they were unable to meet their basic needs. This was due to the degradation of their immediate environment as well as the introduction of commercial farming, which replaced the growing of household food crops. But international trade controlled the price of the exports from these small-scale farmers and a reasonable and just income could not be guaranteed. I came to understand that when the environment is destroyed, plundered or mismanaged, we undermine our quality of life and that of future generations.

Tree planting became a natural choice to address some of the initial basic needs identified by women. Also, tree planting is simple, attainable and guarantees quick, successful results within a reasonable amount time. This sustains interest and commitment.

So, together, we have planted over 30 million trees that provide fuel, food, shelter, and income to support their children's education and household needs. The activity also creates employment and improves soils and watersheds.

Through their involvement, women gain some degree of power over their lives, especially their social and economic position and relevance in the family. This work continues.

Initially, the work was difficult because historically our people have been persuaded to believe that because they are poor, they lack not only capital, but also knowledge and skills to address their challenges. Instead they are conditioned to believe that solutions to their problems must come from 'outside'.

Further, women did not realize that meeting their needs depended on their environment being healthy and well managed. They were also unaware that a degraded environment leads to a scramble for scarce resources and may culminate in poverty and even conflict. They were also unaware of the injustices of international economic arrangements.

In order to assist communities to understand these linkages, we developed a citizen education program, during which people identify their problems, the causes and possible solutions. They then make connections between their own personal actions and the problems they witness in the environment and in society. They learn that our world is confronted with a litany of woes: corruption, violence against women and children, disruption and breakdown of families, and disintegration of cultures and communities. They also identify the abuse of drugs and chemical substances, especially among young people. There are also devastating diseases that are defying cures or occurring in epidemic proportions.

Of particular concern are HIV/AIDS, malaria and diseases associated with malnutrition.

On the environment front, they are exposed to many human activities that are devastating to the environment and societies. These include widespread destruction of ecosystems, especially through deforestation, climatic instability, and contamination in the soils and waters that all contribute to excruciating poverty.

In the process, the participants discover that they must be part of the solutions. They realize their hidden potential and are empowered to overcome inertia and take action. They come to recognize that they are the primary custodians and beneficiaries of the environment that sustains them.

Entire communities also come to understand that while it is necessary to hold their governments accountable, it is equally important that in their own relationships with each other, they exemplify the leadership values they wish to see in their own leaders, namely justice, integrity and trust.

Although initially the Green Belt Movement's tree planting activities did not address issues of democracy and peace, it soon became clear that responsible governance of the environment was impossible without democratic space. Therefore, the tree became a symbol for the democratic struggle in Kenya. Citizens were mobilized to challenge widespread abuses of power, corruption and environmental mismanagement. In Nairobi's Uhuru Park, at Freedom Corner, and in many parts of the country, trees of peace were planted to demand the release of prisoners of conscience and a peaceful transition to democracy. Through the Green Belt Movement, thousands of ordinary citizens were mobilized and empowered to take action and effect change. They learned to overcome fear and a sense of helplessness and moved to defend democratic rights.

In time, the tree also became a symbol for peace and conflict resolution, especially during ethnic conflicts in Kenya when the Green Belt Movement used peace trees to reconcile disputing communities. During the ongoing re-writing of the Kenyan constitution, similar trees of peace were planted in many parts of the country to promote a culture of peace. Using trees as a symbol of peace is in keeping with a widespread African tradition. For example, the elders of the Kikuyu carried a staff from the *thigi* tree that, when placed between two disputing sides, caused them to stop fighting and seek reconciliation. Many communities in Africa have these traditions.

Such practices are part of an extensive cultural heritage, which contributes both to the conservation of habitats and to cultures of peace. With the destruction of these cultures and the introduction of new values, local biodiversity is no longer valued or protected and as a result, it is quickly degraded and disappears. For this reason, The Green Belt Movement explores the concept of cultural biodiversity, especially with respect to indigenous seeds and medicinal plants.

As we progressively understood the causes of environmental degradation, we saw the need for good governance. Indeed, the state of any country's environment is a reflection of the kind of governance in place, and without good governance there can be no peace. Many countries, which have poor governance systems, are also likely to have conflicts and poor laws protecting the environment.

In 2002, the courage, resilience, patience and commitment of members of the Green Belt Movement, other civil society organizations, and the Kenyan public culminated in the peaceful transition to a democratic government and laid the foundation for a more stable society.

Excellencies, friends, ladies and gentlemen,

It is 30 years since we started this work. Activities that devastate the environment and societies continue unabated. Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own – indeed, to embrace the whole creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder. This will happen if we see the need to revive our sense of belonging to a larger family of life, with which we have shared our evolutionary process. In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other.

That time is now.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee has challenged the world to broaden the understanding of peace: there can be no peace without equitable development; and there can be no development without sustainable management of the environment in a democratic and peaceful space. This shift is an idea whose time has come.

I call on leaders, especially from Africa, to expand democratic space and build fair and just societies that allow the creativity and energy of their citizens to flourish.

Those of us who have been privileged to receive education, skills, and experiences and even power must be role models for the next generation of leadership. In this regard, I would also like to appeal for the freedom of my fellow laureate Aung San Suu Kyi so that she can continue her work for peace and democracy for the people of Burma and the world at large.

Culture plays a central role in the political, economic and social life of communities. Indeed, culture may be the missing link in the development of Africa. Culture is dynamic and evolves over time, consciously discarding retrogressive traditions, like female genital mutilation (FGM), and embracing aspects that are good and useful.



Africans, especially, should re-discover positive aspects of their culture. In accepting them, they would give themselves a sense of belonging, identity and self-confidence.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is also need to galvanize civil society and grassroots movements to catalyze change. I call upon governments to recognize the role of these social movements in building a critical mass of responsible citizens, who help maintain checks and balances in society. On their part, civil society should embrace not only their rights but also their responsibilities.

Further, industry and global institutions must appreciate that ensuring economic justice, equity and ecological integrity are of greater value than profits at any cost.

The extreme global inequities and prevailing consumption patterns continue at the expense of the environment and peaceful co-existence. The choice is ours. I would like to call on young people to commit themselves to activities that contribute toward achieving their long-term dreams. They have the energy and creativity to shape a sustainable future. To the young people I say, you are a gift to your communities and indeed the world. You are our hope and our future. The holistic approach to development, as exemplified by the Green Belt Movement, could be embraced and replicated in more parts of Africa and beyond. It is for this reason that I have established the Wangari Maathai Foundation to ensure the continuation and expansion of these activities.

Although a lot has been achieved, much remains to be done.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

As I conclude I reflect on my childhood experience when I would visit a stream next to our home to fetch water for my mother. I would drink water straight from the stream. Playing among the arrowroot leaves I tried in vain to pick up the strands of frogs' eggs, believing they were beads. But every time I put my little fingers under them they would break. Later, I saw thousands of tadpoles: black, energetic and wriggling through the clear water against the background of the brown earth. This is the world I inherited from my parents.

Today, over 50 years later, the stream has dried up, women walk long distances for water, which is not always clean, and children will never know what they have lost. The challenge is to restore the home of the tadpoles and give back to our children a world of beauty and wonder.

Thank you very much.