

THE AFRICA SOCIETY
PROFILE OF

DR. WANGARI MAATHAI

Coordinator, the African Green Belt Movement
Nairobi, Kenya

"We have a special responsibility to the ecosystem of this planet. In making sure that other species survive we will be ensuring the survival of our own."

-Dr. Wangari Maathai

"...every time you provide leadership – every time you speak out, you expect you may suffer for what you believe in."

-Dr. Wangari Maathai

Dr. Wangari Maathai is a Professor of Veterinary Medicine and internationally renowned as the Co-ordinator of the Green Belt Movement, an environmental conservation group first started in Kenya and now across Sub-Saharan Africa. Dr. Maathai also has the distinction of being the first woman in Kenya to obtain a doctorate.

Dr. Maathai was born in Tetu, Nyeri, Kenya in 1940. Between 1948 and 1951 she attended Itithe Primary School, followed by St. Cecilia's School between 1952 and 1955 and Loreto Girls' School between 1956 and 1959. Dr. Maathai began her advanced education in the United States, first attending Mt. St. Scholastica College in Kansas for a B.A. between 1960 and 1964, and the University of Pittsburgh for her M.A. between 1964 and 1965. In 1966 she returned home to Kenya as a Research Assistant at the University of Nairobi. Later, she trained in biological sciences and obtained a doctorate from the University of Nairobi, and later taught veterinary anatomy. In 1976, she became the Chair of Veterinary Anatomy and in 1977 was promoted to an Associate Professor. Dr. Maathai was the first woman in Kenya to attain these academic positions.

In addition to her academic and professional pursuits, Dr. Maathai is internationally renowned as a women's rights and environmental activist. In the mid-1970s she became active in the National Council of Women of Kenya, and Chair of the group between 1981-1987. It was in the Council that she first introduced the idea of planting trees. This idea soon grew into a broad-based, grassroots organization – the Green Belt Movement – whose purpose is both environmental conservation and improving the quality of life for Kenyan women.

In the early 1980s the Green belt Movement has led to the establishment of some 600 tree nurseries, with between 2,000 and 3,000 women involved. There was also some 2,000 public green belts with a 1,000 seedlings each, and some one-half million children involved. As well, over 15,000 farmers planted woodlots on their private farms. By the mid-1980s, the Movement had expanded into the Pan African Green Belt Network, whose aim was to introduce the concept to other African states. As a consequence, the Green Belt Movement has been adopted in Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Lesotho, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, among other states. In 1988, Dr. Maathai launched an international campaign which prevented Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi from building the tallest skyscraper in Africa at Uhuru Park in Nairobi. The building would have cost US \$200 million, borrowed from foreign banks. Dr. Maathai queried: "We already have a debt crisis – we owe billions to foreign banks now. And the people are starving. They need food; they need medicine; they need education. They do not need a skyscraper to house the ruling party and a 24-hour TV station." She also asked: "We can provide parks for rhinos and elephants; why can't we provide open spaces for the people? Why are we creating environmental havoc in urban areas?" The opposition to the building also came from the Kenyan National Museum and the Association of Architects. Nonetheless, Moi targeted Dr. Maathai, calling her a "mad woman," and a "threat to the order and security of the country." The Green Belt Movement was evicted from its offices and subjected to ongoing harassment by the governing party and the police.

By 1993, the women of the Green Belt Movement had planted over 20 million trees, on farms, in schoolyards, and on church premises. Today, some 20 years after its founding, the Movement has realized many of its environmental objectives viz. protecting the environment through tree planting, soil protection, sustainable environmental management, rural employment and improving the living conditions and images of women. It has mobilized women who now sell their seeds to the Movement, and use the income to meet domestic and family needs, educate their children, and invest in other income-generating ventures. As well, across Kenya and Sub-Saharan Africa, people are learning about trees and have become “foresters without diplomas.” The Movement has grown from 600 nurseries to some 3,000 tree nurseries. It has generated over 3,000 part-time jobs.

In the 1990s, Dr. Maathai’s work has focused on improving the human rights record in Kenya and working towards a more tolerant and multi-ethnic Kenya. Her work has led to her being subjected to defamation, detention and physical attacks.

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