

Professor Wangari Maathai



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Wangari Muta Maathai was born on April 1st, 1940 in the village of Ithite in the Nyeri District of Kenya. Around 1943 her family moved to a White-owned farm where her father had found work, she lived there until 1947 when her mother returned to Ithite so 2 of her brothers could attend school (there was no schooling on the farm). At the age of 8 she joined her brothers in Primary school and at the age of 11 she moved to St. Cecilia's Intermediate Primary School, which was a catholic boarding school in Nyeri. She spent four years at the school becoming fluent in English and converting to Catholicism. While at Cecilia's she was protected from the Mau Mau Uprising that caused her mother to move to an emergency village. She graduated first in her class and was admitted to Loreto High School in Limuru, the only Catholic High School for Girls in Kenya. As colonialism ended in East Africa Kenyan Politicians began to look for ways to make education in Western Nations available, and with the help of Senator John Kennedy, the Kennedy Airlift Program was created. Maathai was one of roughly 300 kenyans selected to study in the United States in September of 1960.

She received a scholarship to Mount St. Scholastica College (what is now Benedictine College) where she majored in biology and minored in chemistry and German receiving her degree in 1964. She then went on to the University of Pittsburgh to receive her master's degree in biology, she

also had her first experience with environmental restoration working with local environmentalist pushing for air pollution control in the city. After graduating from Mount St. Scholastica College in 1966 she was appointed to research assistant to a professor of zoology at the University College of Nairobi. However, she returned to Kenya only to find that her position had been given to someone else, a move that she believed was caused by her gender and her tribe. After months of searching she was finally given another job as a research assistant in the microanatomy section of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy, in the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University College of Nairobi. That same year she meet and marry Mwangi Maathai (a Kenyan who had also studied in America), rent a small shop to start a general store, and employed her sisters. In 1967 she traveled to Germany to pursue her doctorate, but returned to Nairobi in May of 1969 married, later that same year became pregnant with her first child while her husband campaigned for a seat in Parliament. In 1971 she received her PhD in Veterinary Anatomy becoming the first Eastern African Woman to do so; she also had her second child.

By 1975, Maathai became a senior lecturer in anatomy at Nairobi; she would also become the chair of the department of Veterinary Anatomy in 1976, associate professor in 1977, and was the first woman to hold any of these titles. She was also campaigning for equal benefits for women as she worked on the staff of the university, she even made the attempt to convert the Academic Staff Association into a union but was denied by the courts; but many of her demands were met. She also became involved in a lot of off campus organizations in the early 1970's. She became the director of the Kenya Red Cross Society in 1973, member of the Kenya Association of University Women, and she would eventually become the board chair of the Environment Liaison Centre to name a few. Through her work it became clear to her that most of Kenya's problems could be attributed to environmental degradation.

In 1974, she would give birth to her third child. During this time her husband campaigned for Parliament and won on the promise of finding jobs. This caused her to connect her activism with employment options and led to the creation of Envirocare Ltd., which was a business centered around getting ordinary people to plant trees. The project failed with numerous problems mostly centered on funding but it made her important connections. During a speech to the National Council of Women of Kenya she proposed further tree planting, and on June 5th 1977 marking World Environment Day, the NCWK marched from Kenyatta International Conference Centre to Kamukunji Park, there they planted 7 trees in honor of historical Community leaders. This marked the first Green Belt known at the time as the Save the Land Harambee. She encouraged many women to plant trees by searching the forest for seeds native to the region and replanting them; she agreed to pay the women a stipend for each seedling they planted.

In 1979 after a 2 year separation, she was divorced and her husband cited that she was cruel and an adulteress. It is believed that he thought she was too strong willed for a woman and uncontrollable. In an interview after the trial she accused the judge of being incompetent and corrupt, which landed her in jail with a 6 month sentence for contempt of court, however she only served 3 days. Her husband also sent her a letter demanding that she drop his surname however

she chose to add an extra “a” instead of dropping the name. Facing financial hardships she accepted a job with the Economic Commission for Africa, because of the travel it required she had to send her children to live with her ex-husband.

After the divorce she decided to run for chairperson of the National Council of Women of Kenya, however the president of Kenya wanted to limit the power of people from her Kikuyu Ethnicity, he did not support her bid and she ended up losing by 3 votes, and eventually accepted the position of vice-chairman. The following year she ran for chairman again but won the election, the organization soon found all of its funding dried up and began facing bankruptcy. The NCWK survived through her leadership and she remained chairwoman until she retired in 1987.

In 1982 she ran for Parliament which required her to quit her job at the university. She was declared ineligible after filing an appeal which she lost, she would attempt to get her job back but was denied, she was eventually evicted from her home because she lived in staff housing and was no longer on the staff. During this time she moved into a home she purchased years before and began working on the Green Belt Movement. After linking with a Norwegian Forestry Society and receiving funding from the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Women, she had the capital to refine her operation, hire staff, and continue paying the women for the planting of trees, along with the husbands and sons that were tracking the plantings.

Maathai found herself again in a hot seat when she along with her organization began to take democratic stances that conflicted with the government. She publicly denounced the government as carrying out electoral frauds to remain in power. She also engaged in a very public battle to prevent the construction of a 60 story Kenya Times Media Trust Complex in Uhuru Park. In addition to being the new home for the Kenyan News outlets, the complex was also intended to house shopping malls, auditoriums, and a large statue of the president of Kenya. During this feud she wrote letters of protest to the president’s office and anyone else that had a mailbox, including Sir John Johnson and the British High Commissioner in Nairobi. The government did not respond to her letters but attacked her in the media labeling her as a crazy woman. The government also attacked her for writing to the foreign nations, it called the Green Belt Movement a bogus organization suggesting that if she was so comfortable writing to Europeans then she should go live in Europe. The project was eventually cancelled because of international pressure largely centered on Maathai.

The movement continued to grow becoming an international force, although Maathai and her movement continued to be at odds with the Kenyan Government. In 1999 she found herself and her organization at the center of an international protest to prevent the Kenyan government from giving public land to political supporters. Her movement won the day regarding that specific incident; in 2002 after many years of trying, she finally managed to unite opposing parties to the ruling party under one roof, and won a seat on Parliament with 98% of the vote. In 2004, Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her fight to gain sustainable development, democracy and peace. She was later appointed Assistant Minister in the Ministry for Environment and Natural

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Resources. She was also responsible for planting over 35 million trees, founding the Mazingira Green Party, and continuing to fight for what she believed in, until she died from complications regarding ovarian cancer in 2011. Professor Wangari Muta Maathai, we proudly stand on your Shoulders.

Patrick Irvine

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWrgeWSiJt4>

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