

Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai: Connecting Trees, Civic Education, and Peace

Iftikhar Ahmad

IN 2004, the Norwegian Nobel Committee departed from its time-honored tradition of awarding its prestigious peace prize to an individual dedicated to ending armed conflict. Instead, the Nobel Committee re-interpreted the 1895 will of Swedish philanthropist Alfred Nobel—who founded the acclaimed prize—and, to the delight of many environmentalists, the Nobel Committee expanded its definition of ‘peace.’ For the first time in its history the committee recognized environmental preservation, community empowerment, and democratic governance as central elements in the promotion of peace and human rights. The committee noted that forests are a natural resource that sustain life in Africa, and that deforestation leads to poverty, ethnic conflicts, and needless human suffering. Hence, the Nobel Committee selected a Kenyan environmental activist, Wangari Maathai, as the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.

For the 2004 peace award, the Nobel Committee had received 194 nominations, including many prominent names such as Mohammed El Baradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency of the United Nations. Yet, the committee selected Wangari Maathai, the founder of the Green Belt Movement, a voluntary organization dedicated to environmental preservation, women’s rights, and community development. In explaining why it had selected Maathai, the Nobel Committee offered four reasons.¹ First, Maathai had mobilized poor rural women in Kenya to improve their living conditions through an extensive campaign of tree plantation. Second, she combined science, social

“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.”

The Norwegian Nobel Committee, 2004



commitment, and active politics for sustainable development. Third, for many years, in spite of the oppressive methods of various regimes in Kenya, Maathai had struggled for social justice and led women volunteers in planting more than 30 million trees. And finally, the committee stated its admiration for Maathai's activism and unique form of action which had drawn national and international attention to political oppression in her country.²

During the past two decades, Maathai has won numerous high-status local and international awards for her immense contribution to social causes in Africa, including the Jane Addams Leadership award, the UN Africa Award for Leadership, the Woman of the Year Award, and the Global 500 Award of the United Nations Environment Program.³ Indeed, she has been a source of inspiration to environmentalists, feminists, and human rights activists around the world and is being profiled in more than a dozen book chapters, films, and documentaries on the environment and community action. Maathai is the sixth person from the African continent and the first African woman to win the peace prize.⁴

Maathai's Life and Mission

The daughter of a peasant farmer, Wangari Muta Maathai was born in Nyeri, Kenya, in 1940. The town of Nyeri is located in a valley near Mount Kenya, the highest peak in the country. Maathai recounts that her love of trees began quite early, and as a child she loved a huge wild fig tree. To many Africans, fig trees symbolize the sacred mountains, nature, and God.⁵

In the early 1960s, Maathai won a scholarship through the Catholic bishop of Nyeri to study biology and liberal arts at Mount St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas. In 1966, she earned a Master of Science degree from the University of Pittsburgh. She subsequently returned home and joined the doctoral program in veterinary anatomy at the University of Nairobi. In 1971, she was granted a Ph.D. She was the first black African woman in Eastern and Central Africa to earn a doctorate and to be appointed as a professor at the University of Nairobi. In addition to

teaching at the university, Maathai played an active role in the women's rights movement of Kenya. In 1976, Maathai joined the National Council of Women of Kenya (later serving as the organization's chair from 1981 to 1987), and under the organization's auspices in 1977 launched the Green Belt Movement, a grassroots tree planting movement, to address the pressing problems of malnutrition, hunger, wood-fuel, and environmental degradation.⁶

Initially her activism had been aimed simply at improving living conditions for women. However, along the way it became clear that this work could not be separated from politics, democracy, and peace in general. She saw a close connection between environmental degradation and poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, the mismanagement of natural resources, and political conflicts throughout Africa. Her mission began with the poor, rural women of Kenya who endure extreme hardship in their daily lives. These women, responsible for cooking meals for the family, are forced to cut trees for wood fuel since they do not have access to other sources of fuel. In their quest for wood fuel, women walk for miles carrying heavy wood on their backs. This practice not only caused hardship for women, it also destroyed forests. Maathai taught women to plant trees on their own farms to solve their fuel problem. Hence the Green Belt Movement recruited an army of sixty thousand poor rural women to plant trees.⁷ Over time the tree-planting drive expanded to become a broad-based organization, which spread to twenty countries. The movement planted thirty million trees on farms, schools, and public places all over Africa, which not only earned poor women income but also improved the quality of their lives. In a period of twenty years, Maathai's leadership, combined with rural women's commitment to the environment, transformed countless barren spaces into green oases.⁸ This massive tree planting movement aided people all over Africa in that it produced firewood and nutritional food for the poor, provided employment for rural women, and empowered communities. More importantly, it protected the environment from widespread destruction.

The women plant only indigenous species such as fig, banana, citrus, papaw, papaya, avocado, nandi flame, acacia, thorn, and cedar.⁹ Maathai has always taught women to plant more trees than they will need to cut for fuelwood. Given Kenya's mild climate, trees mature in about three to five years. For each tree that survives three months (80 percent do), the women receive a token payment of four cents; the more trees they planted, the more money they made. For many of these unemployed women, the money they received was more than they had ever earned. As their trees mature, the women earn additional income by selling fruit and fuelwood.

"Tree-planting empowered poor rural women because it was not a complicated thing. It was something they could do and see the results of. They noticed that by their actions they could improve the quality of their own lives," Maathai says.¹⁰

When it was first starting out, the Green Belt Movement received a small grant to set up a tree nursery project. In 1981, the United Nations Development Fund for Women provided an additional grant of \$100,000 towards the tree-planting project; this helped the movement's effort to recruit rural women, plant trees, and raise awareness about the environment. With little initial training from the department of forestry, the women used traditional skills and creative innovation in their tree planting campaign. They launched more than three thousand tree nurseries in Kenya, which provided the main source of seedlings to tree planters.¹¹

Unfortunately, Maathai often clashed with the government of Kenya because her actions inevitably exposed corruption. Kenya's dictator, then-President Daniel arap Moi, was especially irritated when she publicly opposed the government's plan to construct a sixty-story office tower and a shopping mall in the middle of Nairobi's Uhuru Park.¹² Uhuru Park, one of the last remaining green areas in Nairobi and a park of historical significance, provided a major shady haven for downtown workers and urban residents, especially residents of local slums.

Maathai filed suit against the ruling party on behalf of the Green Belt

Teaching Resources

Useful Websites for Teaching about Africa

To learn more about Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement visit www.wangarimaathai.or.ke and www.greenbeltmovement.org.

www.teachafrika.net

Teachafrika is facilitated by the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota and is dedicated to the teaching of Africa and the African Diaspora across the disciplines. The key features of this site include materials on anthropology, history, literature, fine arts, geography, and political science.

exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu

This site belongs to the African Studies Center of Michigan State University. Teachers interested in bringing the diversity of Africa into the classroom will find suggested curricula, classroom activities, country overviews, current events, and related resources to aid in the development of their own teaching plans.

www.africa.upenn.edu/k-12/menu_EduBBS.html

The African Study Center at the University of Pennsylvania has launched this website, which is exclusively focused on K-12 education. An interesting feature of this site is its section on countries in Africa. Lesson plans and teaching strategies are also given.

www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/cur.html

Although Cyberschoolbus is essentially about the activities of the United Nations in the world, teachers can use this site to teach about critical issues like peace, poverty, human rights, and other events in Africa or elsewhere. Information about all member states is also available.

www.africaonline.com/site/sitenew/

Africaonline offers information about the diverse cultures, politics, current events, sports, music, and business on the African continent. This website also facilitates discussion. It is essentially geared to people who are interested in popular culture.

www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/africa/cuvl/teaching.html

This extensive website is managed by the department of African Studies at Columbia University which compiles electronic bibliographic resources and research materials on Africa. Although the scope of this website is research-oriented, it provides links to different educational websites about Africa.

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Films & Documentaries Featuring Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement

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Sustainable Development (1991), BBC for One World Women

Information and Empowerment: Dr. Wangari Maathai (1994), AFSC Video & Film Library Africa

The Uncovered Continent (1995), Chip Taylor Africa

Search for Common Ground (1997), Common Ground Productions USA

South Africa: Eritrea/Kenya: Democracy or Disruption - W. Maathai & Green Belt (1998), Common Ground Productions, USA

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Websites on Environmental Education for K-12 Grades

www.epa.gov
This interactive website belongs to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. It has sections for teachers, students, and researchers covering almost all important issues related to environmental education. Although the site is comprehensive, teachers and students can click on "educational resources" to get to relevant materials.

www.enviroliteracy.org
This site is maintained by the Environmental Literacy Council, a non-profit organization. The aim of the site is to give teachers the tools to help students develop environmental literacy: a fundamental understanding of the systems of the world, both living and non-living, along with the analytical skills needed to weigh scientific evidence and policy choices. Topics such as land, water, ecosystem, energy, food, environment and culture are discussed.

www.urbanoptions.org/SustainEdHandbook/
This website is called "Sustainability Education Handbook: Resource Guide for K-12 Teachers" and is established by Urban Options, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the environmental quality of urban spaces. Although its main focus is the Michigan state standards, it offers a comprehensive list of links to environmental organizations.

www.ec.gc.ca/regeng.html
This wide-ranging site belongs to Environment Canada. Almost every topic relating to the environment is included but the section on K-12 is very useful. Complex topics are explained in simple language so that they make sense to all readers. Although the website is specific to Canada, the issues are universal and should be relevant to everyone.

education.massey.ac.nz/environment/
This site is called "environmental education" and is developed by David Chapman of Massey University in New Zealand. It discusses what individuals can do to protect the environment, how to integrate environmental issues into the curriculum, and much more.

Movement. The judge dismissed the lawsuit, politicians condemned Maathai, and the government denied her application for a permit to stage a public demonstration against the construction project. In addition, the government evicted the Green Belt Movement from the premises it used as an office. It was given twenty-four hours to vacate. President Moi also threatened to cancel the movement's registration as a non-profit organization and declare the group illegal. All this drew much attention for Maathai in the international media. Foreign governments, the United Nations, the World Bank, and international environmental organizations pressured the Kenyan government to end its oppressive methods. Foreign investors also backed off from the construction project. The government was forced to scale back the size and scope of its building plan. It was a significant victory for the Green Belt Movement. But this victory also had a cost: the Green Belt Movement lost its office space and Maathai had to use her own home as the organization's headquarters.³ Ultimately, Maathai concluded that improving living conditions for women would require more than planting trees. Basic human rights, freedom from authoritarian rule, and the right to dissent were also needed.

Maathai later became a member of parliament and joined an opposition party called "Forum for the Restoration of Democracy" (FORD). In 1991, the government cracked down on a rally organized by FORD. Police arrested Maathai along with other opposition leaders and attacked Maathai's house, smashing through the windows and doors.⁴ Already suffering from arthritis and heart problems, Maathai spent the night in a cold, damp, concrete cell without a blanket or mattress. The next day she had to be taken on a stretcher to her hearing. Although the police released her, she had to spend several days in the hospital recovering. Later, the government dropped charges, but from then on, Maathai said she never felt safe in her own country.⁵

Environment and Civic Education

Maathai not only teaches basic democratic values and civic participation, she believes

in community empowerment.¹⁶ She says that because Kenya is an underdeveloped country with limited resources, trees are a vital natural resource that can sustain the traditional Kenyan way of life by providing nutritional fruits and firewood, as well as clean air. She encourages Kenyans to take responsibility for the environment, exercise their rights as citizens, and hold their government accountable. She says there is a close connection between environmental conservation, civic education, and peace. The program of civic education that she promotes through the Green Belt Movement includes teaching about basic human rights, culture, leadership, good governance, equity, respect for natural resources, and responsibility toward future generations.¹⁷ Recognizing the effectiveness of Maathai's civic education strategy, American organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Institute funded Maathai's outreach to schools.¹⁸

Maathai believes that young children should not only be made aware of the social, political, and economic challenges of their local community, they should also be taught the necessary skills to solve those problems. Being a strong advocate for teaching democratic citizenship skills through service-learning, Maathai has suggested that schools raise awareness about primary environmental care and enhance knowledge, attitudes, and values that support sustainable grassroots socio-economic and ecological welfare.¹⁹ She says schools should help children acquire the democratic values of social justice, respect for the environment, and social responsibility.²⁰ Maathai also believes that schools should teach students to take an active role

in the protection of community resources such as trees and the environment. Hence, Maathai's Green Belt Movement introduced the tree-planting project to three thousand schools.²¹ An average of five hundred children per school worked in the project. In all, more than one million children participated in the tree-planting campaign.

The project taught young children to dig holes, plant trees on school grounds, and care for the trees while attending school.²² According to Maathai, planting trees is a strategy to empower young people and to give children a sense of taking their destiny into their own hands. Planting trees helps young people take responsibility for the protection of their own environment; it also encourages them to stand up for their environmental rights. Maathai's school civic education project has taught students leadership and organizational skills, fostered cooperative attitudes, and enhanced students' consciousness about human rights and social justice. In addition to teaching school children about their environmental rights and responsibilities, the Green Belt Movement also extended civic education to adults both in rural and urban settings.

"Some people have asked what the relationship is between peace and environment, and to them I say that many wars are fought over resources, which are becoming increasingly scarce across the earth," Maathai said responding to the news that she had won the Nobel Peace Prize. "If we did a better job of managing our resources sustainably, conflicts over them would be reduced. So, protecting the global environment is directly related to securing peace."²³

Notes

1. The Norwegian Nobel Committee, nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/2004
2. *Ibid.*
3. The Green Belt Movement, www.greenbeltmovement.org/cv.htm
4. Wangari Maathai is the sixth African to win a Nobel Peace Prize, but the eleventh to win any Nobel Prize. Albert John Lutuli from South Africa won the peace prize in 1961; Wole Soyinka from Nigeria won the prize for literature in 1986; Bishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa won the peace prize in 1984; Naguib Mahfouz from Egypt won the prize for literature in 1988; Nadine Gordimer from South Africa won the prize for literature in 1991; Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk, both from South Africa, won the peace prize in 1993; Ahmed Zewail from Egypt won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1999; Kofi Annan from Ghana won the peace prize in 2001; and JM Coetzee of South Africa won the prize for literature in 2003.
5. Aubrey Wallace, *Eco Heroes: Twelve Tales of Environmental Victory* (San Francisco, Calif.: Mercury House, 1993), 10.
6. Wangari Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (New York: Lantern Books, 2002), 29.
7. Mary Joy Breton, *Women Pioneers for the Environment* (Boston, Mass.: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 12.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Maathai, 28.
10. Kerry Kennedy Cuomo, *Speak Truth to Power* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2000), 38.
11. Breton, 16.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 14.
14. Wallace, 17.
15. Breton, 12.
16. Wallace, 7.
17. Maathai, 113.
18. *Ibid.*, 59.
19. *Ibid.*, 112.
20. *Ibid.*, 45, 113.
21. Breton, 14.
22. Wallace, 5.
23. www.greenbeltmovement.org

IFTIKHAR AHMAD is a professor of education at Long Island University, New York. He is the author of *CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION: POLITICAL SCIENTISTS' STRUGGLE FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM* (American University and College Press, 2003).