



From little acorns

Adjoining our home we have a small plot of land where I have spent a good deal of time planting and tending trees. Despite losses due to wind, frost and in one or two cases a chainsaw there are today some 140 trees and shrubs of over 40 species. When we first acquired the land my daughter planted an acorn. Now some twenty years later it is a large...but not quite “mighty” oak.

For nearly thirty years Maathai Wangari mobilised the women of rural Kenya to plant 30 million trees. Her life's work demonstrates the positive effect one person can make. ⁰¹

Maathai Wangari was born in Kenya 1st April 1940. The daughter of a peasant farmer she led a remarkable life. As an academic she was the first woman in post-independence Kenya to earn a PhD and the first female head of a University Department.

But she is mainly remembered for her work for the environment. ⁰²

In Kenya under English colonial rule the emphasis had been on land clearance to plant cash crops. The result was a denuded landscape and forests were reduced to less than 2% of the land area.

In 1977, while serving on the National Council of Women, Maathai Wangari listened to the problems faced by rural women. She realised that all were rooted in this degraded environment ⁰³ and developed the idea of healing the damage by implementing a nationwide tree-planting campaign: ⁰¹



“Planting trees came to me as a concrete, doable response”⁰³

The first tree nurseries were established in the Lang’ata area. Her work was initially vilified but with her persistence and commitment the idea grew and blossomed. She developed a technique of planting trees in rows of one thousand. It is from this that the organisation took its name...the Green Belt Movement (GBM). The GBM is a grass-roots non-governmental organisation that focuses on environmental conservation and development. It aims to encourage Kenyans to work collectively to save their nation from deforestation through an active participation in forestation and reforestation.⁰¹

“We resolve to save our land...through the planting of trees”⁰¹

A ceremony was held to mark the planting of the first tree in June 1977. Interest steadily grew. Farmers, schools, churches and many women were eager to participate.⁰¹

The initial idea was to help rural populations, especially women, by planting trees to provide food and timber for cooking and heating.⁰³ Other benefits include an improvement to the local environment,⁰¹ preventing soil erosion, regulating water cycles and promoting biodiversity. Planting trees also mitigates Climate Change through the sequestration of carbon.⁰⁴

In 1981 funding from the United Nations Fund for Women and other international supporters allowed

the movement to undertake more tree-planting. GBM established tree nurseries nationwide and by 1999 some 6000 tree nurseries had been established in 26 districts planting a wide range of indigenous trees and some exotic fruit trees.⁰¹

GBM also organised seminars to teach the basics of tree production, planting and care. One of the key values promoted was love for the environment. Wangari Maathai believed that such love should be the motivation to take positive actions for the Earth.⁰³

“The simple act of tree planting...to heal the earth’s wounds”⁰³



In 2004 the Nobel Committee awarded Wangari Maathai the Nobel Peace Prize. This especially recognised her work in “protecting the environment”⁰¹



In 2006 her example inspired the United Nations Environment Programme to initiate the *“Billion Tree Campaign”*. Thousands of individuals, schools, businesses and governments around the world planted trees. The billionth tree was an African Olive planted in Ethiopia in November 2007. Planting continued in over 193 countries and the campaign achieved another remarkable landmark in October 2011.⁰⁴

“More than 12 billion trees have been planted”⁰⁴

Maathai Wangari died of cancer 25th September 2011 in a Nairobi Hospital.⁰² She had inspired a whole nation to plant millions of trees and then whole world to plant billions more...all one woman’s legacy to the Earth.

“Trees are a symbol of hope”⁰¹

By planting them by the millions Wangri Maathgai and the women of Kenya demonstrate that *“a new greening is possible”*⁰¹. Imagine what a difference it would make to the Earth if we all simply planted and cared for one tree...or in the words of Wangari Maathai:

“I would urge all...to plant a tree.”⁰¹

Maathai

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