



**EARTHKEEPERS**

**PEOPLE WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR TREES AND FORESTS**

# American Forests

VOL. 112, NO. 2

SUMMER 2006

## Planting Trees for Peace

The message brought by Kenya's Nobel Peace Prize winner sounds surprisingly familiar.

By Jane Braxton Little

In the beginning, Wangari Maathai had very little to work with: Seven seedling trees, a handful of resolute women, and a powerful will to bring change to their community. That was enough. Those first trees the women planted together became hundreds. The hundreds became thousands. And the thousands of trees planted by Maathai and other Kenyan women became the Green Belt Movement.

Today their work has been honored by a 2004 Nobel Peace Prize recognizing that the simple act of planting trees reduces conflict, strengthens communities, and contributes to world peace.

"The message is this: If we want a peaceful world, we have to manage our environment responsibly and sustainably," Maathai says. She delivers this deceptively simple message with a warm and direct smile, her dark face luminous beneath an elaborate hat of green and black African cotton print.

Her words have a ring so familiar that I am momentarily too startled to ask my next question. I have heard this message from America's tree planters, harvesters, and community forest activists during a decade of writing about them.

These leaders of a national community-based forestry movement, mostly women, understand the link between their communities and natural resource management, which Maathai, as a world leader, now personifies. Like Maathai, they have looked to the landscapes surrounding them for solutions to problems ranging from poverty to government mismanagement. Like her, they have experienced the profound personal changes that

come from nurturing the natural world around us.

Although Maathai's reach is global and theirs more local, these American grassroots forest activists share her knowledge that planting and tending trees have profoundly powerful ramifications.

"How we use resources—how we share them— affects how we live," says Maathai.

Her understanding of these fundamental connections comes from a childhood spent close to the land. Nibbling at an assortment of fresh fruits during our interview in Portland, Oregon, she tells of working beside her mother on a small plot of ground she called her farm. Together they experienced the rains, the germinating seeds, "the touch of the soil."

Maathai revered the village fig tree, whose roots dove deep into the ground near the spring that fed the stream where her mother sent her to fetch water. She played in the water, stringing around her neck the pale luminescent larvae "beads" that later disappeared, leaving thousands of tadpoles

quick to evade her eager hands.

Years later, when Maathai served on the National Council of Women of Kenya, she began linking her early appreciation of natural systems with the politics of how they are managed. After traveling abroad and earning degrees in biology and veterinary anatomy, she returned to the village of her childhood.

What she found changed her life. The streams that had run full and clean were now trickles laden with silt. The tadpoles had disappeared. The fig tree was long gone, replaced by coffee bushes.



AP/BORN SCHARBORN, POOL

**"The government said, 'If they only planted trees we wouldn't bother them. But they also plant ideas.' And I say it's true."**

*Wangari Maathai with her Nobel Prize in Oslo.*

The people were poor and struggling.

Even more than growing up in the Kenyan countryside, it was the experience of these women still living close to the land that launched the Green Belt Movement. Their needs—for their families and their neighborhoods—spurred Maathai to action (See *American Forests*, September/October 1990). Their close ties to home and their dependence on primary resources made the Kenyan women barometers of the health of the land.

"I placed my faith in the women, who clearly recognize when the water is no longer clean, when the fields have lost their topsoil," she tells me.

When the women complained about pollution

For fostering these lessons, Maathai was harassed, jailed, and vilified.

Across America, women in cities and small towns are also planting ideas as they organize efforts to create forests in urban neighborhoods and improve the management of vast tracts of public stands. Along with new skills, confidence, and a stewardship ethic, they are instilling the notion that people have both the responsibility and the power to take care of themselves and the earth.

For all their differences in projects, approaches, and geography, they share with Maathai and the women of Kenya a focus on common sense solutions that ignore the hierarchies of conventional power. Maathai began with ordinary people and the simplest of materials. In America, community forest activists began with their neighbors—business owners, schoolteachers, and loggers—and their own backyards.

Today they are bringing change to barren U.S. urban streets, now graced with trees; to struggling rural communities, which now offer a few more steady jobs; to federal policy, which is starting to recognize needs at neighborhood levels. They share with the Kenyan women a humility aimed more at exchanging information and improving skills than amassing personal or political power.

Maathai calls them "foresters without diplomas," and they are gaining strength throughout the world. Her Green Belt Movement has placed more than 30 million trees in the ground and spawned sister projects around the world. Since the Nobel Committee's recognition, each planting is honored as a commitment to sustainability, peace, and equitable use of natural resources.

Maathai casts a steady gaze out at her audience, now grown to several thousand assembled by the World Affairs Council of Oregon. Then she launches into a story about a hummingbird. There was a horrific forest fire, she says, her arms lifting slightly like a dancer's. All the animals ran out of the woods to safety. But the hummingbird filled its tiny beak with water and flew back into the smoke, dropping its mouthful over the flames and returning for another load. The other animals laughed at this minuscule effort, Maathai says, her body swaying as if in flight. "What do you think you are doing?" the animals mocked. Poised for yet another trip over the fire, the hummingbird replied, "I'm doing what I can."

As Maathai stares into the sea of faces she seems to single each one of us out.

"Find something you can do," she urges, opening her arms in appeal. "It doesn't have to be a big thing. It's the little things that matter." **AF**

*Contributing editor Jane Braxton Little covers natural resource issues.*

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AP/KAHEL PRINSLOO

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*Women from the Green Belt Movement tend to their tree nursery.*

and erosion, Maathai said, "Let's plant trees." When they said they didn't know how, Maathai said, "We will learn." And they did.

The Kenyan women ignored conventional forestry techniques, relying instead on their traditional skills. Government and industry groups donated the initial batches of seedlings, but after that the women started their own nurseries by finding seeds in their neighborhood. They substituted broken pots for seedbeds, used granaries to keep seedlings away from animals, and taught themselves how to harvest their own nursery seeds by observing the plants closely.

The lessons went well beyond keeping the tender roots moist and cultivating the tiny sprouts until they matured. By planting and growing trees, the women also understood that they had real choices—about themselves, their communities, and their immediate environments. It was this empowerment that attracted government attention, not the small forests that began emerging around the Kenyan countryside, Maathai says.

"The government said, 'If they only planted trees we wouldn't bother them. But they also plant ideas.' And I say it's true," she says, a mischievous grin spreading across her face.