

Name: _____ Class: _____

Growing Trees for Kenya

The Story of Wangari Maathai

By Elizabeth Cregan
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Wangari Maathai (1940-2011) was a Nobel laureate and environmental activist. She is responsible for starting the Green Belt Movement, which worked to restore depleting forests by planting trees. In this informational text, Elizabeth Cregan discusses Maathai's motivations for planting trees and how her actions helped people in Kenya. As you read, take notes on Dr. Maathai's impact on Kenya and the people who live there.

- [1] Growing up in a family of peasant farmers¹ in the highlands of Kenya, Wangari Maathai (Wahn-GAHR-ee Mah-TIE) often fetched² water from a nearby stream. She would stop to play among the clumps of bright-green arrowroot leaves and enjoy sips of cool, pure water. She loved to reach out for the strands of frogs' eggs that drifted by. Later, she watched as thousands of tadpoles wriggled through the clear water.



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An excellent student, Wangari graduated with honors from an all-girl high school run by Catholic missionaries³ and was awarded a full scholarship by the leader of the local Catholic church. It was a rare achievement for a Kenyan girl to attend college in the United States.

Wangari left her rural village and traveled to Mount St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas. She completed degrees in biology in the United States before returning home to become the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate.⁴

When Wangari returned in the mid-1960s, most of Kenya's forests had vanished. The land was parched and barren.⁵ The government had cleared it to grow coffee and tea to sell to other countries. Instead of growing food to eat, farmers now grew crops for the government. This made life difficult for the villagers, especially the women and children.

- [5] Kenyan women raised the crops, gathered firewood to cook, and fed their families. Many walked 19 miles several times a week in search of firewood. Without it, their children were forced to eat foods that didn't require cooking. This caused widespread malnutrition.⁶

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1. a poor farm laborer
 2. **Fetch (verb):** to go for and then bring back something
 3. a person sent by a church to carry out certain activities, such as education or hospital work
 4. an advanced university degree
 5. **Barren (adjective):** unable to support the growth of plants
 6. lack of proper nutrition, caused by not having enough food or not eating the right things

Wangari, now Dr. Maathai, a strong, energetic woman with a broad smile and sparkling eyes, decided to restore the forests by planting trees — millions of them. She was dedicated to improving the lives of her people.

Since trees mature in three to four years in the tropical climate of Kenya, Dr. Maathai thought planting seedlings was the best way to provide villagers with firewood for cooking and fruit to eat and sell. Village women could feed their children and earn small amounts of money by raising seedlings.⁷

On Earth Day⁸ 1977, Dr. Maathai and several followers planted seven trees in her backyard and founded the Green Belt Movement. “The Earth was naked,” she said. “For me, the mission was to try to cover it with green.”

When Dr. Maathai asked the Department of Forestry for 15 million seedlings, they laughed. Government officials often considered rural women ignorant.⁹ But even though these officials believed trained foresters¹⁰ were needed, they gave Dr. Maathai and the Green Belt Movement as many seedlings as they wanted. The women and children planted them so quickly that before long the government withdrew its offer of free seedlings.

- [10] The Green Belt Movement continued to spread across Kenya as thousands of rural women and children collected seeds and started their own nurseries.¹¹ Tree-planting projects at hundreds of schools across Kenya became an important part of the Green Belt Movement. The children fetched seedlings from the nurseries, planted them on school grounds, and tended them as part of their school day.

Keeping seedlings alive in the dark-red, sun-baked earth wasn't easy. To give the baby trees a fighting chance, some children collected soda bottles from trash piles, filled them with water, turned them upside down, and planted them in the earth next to each seedling.

Dr. Maathai also led some of the women in protests against the government's destruction of the forests. In 1989, the women learned that the government was going to destroy the only public park left in the capital city of Nairobi. Government officials planned to cut down most of the trees to make way for construction of a 62-story skyscraper. When the women gathered in the park to protest, they were beaten by police.

Dr. Maathai has been threatened, beaten, and jailed many times by the Kenyan government for protesting the destruction of public forests.

But she never stopped.

- [15] “My skin is thick, like an elephant's. The more they abused... me, the more they hardened me,” she said.

7. a young plant

8. a day celebrated on April 22 to show one's support for the protection of the environment

9. **Ignorant** (*adjective*): lacking knowledge or general awareness

10. a person in charge of a forest or skilled in planting trees

11. a place where young plants and trees are grown for planting elsewhere

More than 100,000 Kenyans have joined the Green Belt Movement, and more than 6,000 groups in villages across Kenya operate their own nurseries. Schoolyards, farms, and church compounds¹² are now green with millions of trees.

Green Belt Movement programs have spread across Africa and around the world. Green belts can be found in U.S. inner cities and Haiti. More than 30 million trees have been planted worldwide.

In 2004, Dr. Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work. She is convinced that “When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and seeds of hope.” She urges¹³ young people around the world not to waste natural resources and to treat them with respect.

Today, green belts cover portions of Kenya’s barren landscape, and fewer villagers go hungry. But Dr. Maathai believes there is still much to do. When asked, “What’s next?” she replied, “More trees. I will grow more trees.”

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12. an open area enclosed by a fence

13. **Urge (verb):** to try to convince someone to do something

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. An education is the most powerful tool one can have to create change.
 - B. Anyone can change the world, whether or not they have an education.
 - C. One person's drive to help others and the environment can impact the world.
 - D. Trees are a necessary part of human survival and need to be preserved.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "She completed degrees in biology in the United States before returning home to become the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "Without it, their children were forced to eat foods that didn't require cooking. This caused widespread malnutrition." (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "To give the baby trees a fighting chance, some children collected soda bottles from trash piles, filled them with water, turned them upside down, and planted them in the earth next to each seedling." (Paragraph 11)
 - D. "Green belts can be found in U.S. inner cities and Haiti. More than 30 million trees have been planted worldwide." (Paragraph 17)

3. PART A: Which of the following describes how the author portrays the relationship between Kenya's government and forests?
 - A. The government believes Kenyan people can find a resource other than trees to provide for them.
 - B. The government wants to support Dr. Maathai's movement to protect forests, as they understand their importance to Kenyan people.
 - C. The government doesn't understand the value of trees to Kenyan people and unknowingly damage their quality of life.
 - D. The government is more concerned with making money than the preservation of the forests or the well-being of the Kenyan people.

4. PART B: Which section from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Kenyan women raised the crops, gathered firewood to cook, and fed their families. Many walked 19 miles several times a week in search of firewood." (Paragraph 5)
 - B. "The government had cleared it to grow coffee and tea to sell to other countries. Instead of growing food to eat, farmers now grew crops for the government." (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "But even though these officials believed trained foresters were needed, they gave Dr. Maathai and the Green Belt Movement as many seedlings as they wanted." (Paragraph 9)
 - D. "In 2004, Dr. Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work. She is convinced that 'When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and seeds of hope.'" (Paragraph 18)

5. How does Dr. Maathai's quote, "The more they abused... me, the more they hardened me" contribute to the development of ideas in the text (Paragraph 15)?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Wangari Maathai was committed to protecting the environment. Why do you think it's important to protect and care for the environment? How does it impact the health of individuals in their communities?
2. In the text, the author explores the importance of trees. How do trees control the livelihood of humans? What do you think will happen in the future if humans continue to destroy more trees than they plant?
3. Wangari Maathai was able to create widespread change through her Green Belt Movement. How was she able to do this? What characteristics do you think she possessed that allowed her to succeed? What is something that you care about that you would like to have an impact on?
4. What motivated Wangari Maathai to become the leader of the Green Belt Movement? Why do you think people followed her? What traits do you think are important for a leader to possess? Which of these did Dr. Maathai possess?