

Women and trees: growing together



Photo: courtesy of Cosmopolitan Magazine

Kenyan environmentalist and human rights activist Wangari Mathaai says thousands of women are planting trees in her country in a campaign organised by the Green Belt Movement. Thoraya Pandy talked to her

Wangari Mathaai is called the Lion of Women in Kenya. She was beaten up by police for protesting against the detention of political activists

Most poor people in the cities and rural areas in Kenya use wood for cooking and other household needs. This means trees are being chopped down faster than they can grow again and the natural environment is being destroyed. That is why Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Mathaai says planting trees is so important.

She is the director of the

Green Belt Movement which has organised a tree-planting campaign to stop this destruction.

"The campaign for planting indigenous trees (trees that naturally belong to an area) has been very successful. At the same time, women are developing a positive image of themselves because they can see the results of their efforts," said Mathaai.

In 1977 Mathaai formed the Movement to involve people in looking after the environment. Since then thousands of people, mainly women, have become active in its campaigns.

Mathaai said the focus of the campaign was in rural areas where mostly women live.

"More than 50 000 women are planting trees all over Kenya. In the last ten years, about seven

million trees have been planted. A million school children have planted trees in over 3 000 schools," she said.

The campaign has also created employment, especially for women in rural areas.

"We are dealing with poor people - you cannot ask them to give money to look after the trees," she said.

"That is why we pay people a small amount of money for every tree they plant and care for - if the tree survives."

Mathaai explained it was difficult to raise money for this project.

"When you try to raise money for women you always run into difficulties," she added.

The Movement gained a lot of local publicity and support when it fought against a government decision to turn a public park into a parking area.

"The park is a place where people relax during their lunch hour and go for walks. It is one of the few places that makes the city beautiful. We were not going to let the government get away with it," she said.

Mathaai said one reason for the victory was the international support for the campaign.

"After the issue was raised at an environmental conference in Sweden, a lot of international pressure was placed on the government.

"This was probably the turning point in the two-year long campaign because it was then the government changed their plans," said Mathaai proudly.

"Kenyans have become much more aware and have realised that the environment is a public



Photo by Thoraja Bandy, SPEAK Magazine

Wangari Mathaai formed the Green Belt Movement in Kenya to mobilise the people to look after the environment

issue which affects them.

"You can educate people on a very basic level. One of the best ways was stopping the president from destroying the park," she added.

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decisions politicians make about the environment," said Mathaai.

The environment is not the only issue Mathaai has challenged the government on.

When she openly protested against the detention of political activists in Kenya, she was beaten up. Mathaai lay unconscious in hospital for about two weeks.

This did not stop her. Mathaai, together with the mothers of those in detention, continued their protest until all the detainees were released.

In Kenya, she is fondly referred to as "*Simba wa Wanawake*" - which means "The Lion of Women". It is a name she continues to live up to. ♻️