

## Topic Page: [Maathai, Wangari](#)

Summary Article: **Maathai, Wangari**

From *The Multimedia Encyclopedia of Women in Today's World*

Wangari Muta Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement, is an activist for environmental conservation, democracy, and women's rights; a professor; and a former Kenyan parliamentarian. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her work as a political advocate who helped combat poverty and deforestation by organizing women to plant millions of trees.

Maathai was born on April 1, 1940, the third of six children, along with several half siblings, in a small village near Nyeri, Kenya. Her parents were subsistence farmers who belonged to the largest ethnic group in Kenya at the time, the Kikuyu. Maathai's father and his four wives moved their family to Nakuru in 1943 to live on land owned by a European settler, who employed Maathai's father as a driver and mechanic.

At age 11, Maathai attended a Catholic boarding school in Kenya until she won a scholarship to Mount St. Scholastic College in Kansas, where she graduated in 1964 with a degree in biology. She went on to earn a master of science from the University of Pittsburgh in 1966.

Her doctoral work included 20 months at the University of Giessen in Germany and about 2 years at the University of Nairobi, where she became the first woman in East Africa to earn a Ph.D., in 1971, and joined the faculty, teaching veterinary anatomy. She became department chair in 1976.

Maathai was married to Mwangi Maathai, a Kenyan businessman and politician, from 1969 until their divorce in 1979, and together they have three children. In 1977, she began growing trees in her backyard and soon gave seedlings to local women, paying them to start their own nurseries. In Kenya, women gather firewood for cooking, and Maathai saw her tree-planting program as a way to help women while saving deforested lands. Today, the Greenbelt Movement has helped create thousands of nurseries and has helped plant more than 40 million trees on community lands in Kenya alone.

### **Political Life**

Maathai often protested the Kenyan government's attempts to limit democracy and destroy the environment, despite the retaliatory beatings and jail time she received. Later, she worked within the government to effect change. She was elected to Kenya's Parliament and served from 2002 to 2007, including an appointment as assistant minister for environment and natural resources from 2003 to 2007.

In addition to the Nobel Prize, Maathai has received numerous awards, including France's highest honor, Legion d'Honneur, in 2006, and honorary degrees from universities worldwide. She served the boards of more than a dozen organizations, including the National Council of Women of Kenya, and the Women and Environment Development Organization. She has served the United Nations in several capacities, including its commissions on governance and the future and on the U.N. Secretary General's Advisory Board on Disarmament. In 2009, Maathai became a U.N. Messenger of Peace. Her most recent book is *The Challenge for Africa*, published in 2009.

### **See Also:**

Environmental Activism, Grassroots, Environmental Issues, Women and, Green Belt Movement, Kenya,

Women and Environment Development Organization.

### Further Readings

- Greenbelt Movement. <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org> (accessed July 2010).
- Maathai, Wangari *The Challenge for Africa*. New York: Pantheon, 2009.
- Maathai, Wangari *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience*. New York: Lantern Books, 2003.
- Maathai, Wangari *Unbowed: A Memoir*. New York: Knopf, 2006.

Edy, Carolyn

### APA

Chicago

Harvard

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Edy, C., & Edy. (2011). Maathai, Wangari. In M. Stange, & C. Oyster, *The multimedia encyclopedia of women in today's world*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/maathai\\_wangari\\_1940](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/maathai_wangari_1940)

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## Chicago

Edy, Carolyn, and Edy. "Maathai, Wangari." In *The Multimedia Encyclopedia of Women in Today's World*, by Mary Stange, and Carol Oyster. Sage Publications, 2011.

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## Harvard

Edy, C. and Edy. (2011). Maathai, Wangari. In M. Stange & C. Oyster, *The multimedia encyclopedia of women in today's world*. [Online]. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. Available from: [https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/maathai\\_wangari\\_1940](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/maathai_wangari_1940) [Accessed 15 November 2019].

## MLA

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