



Wangari Maathai

Wangari Maathai (1940–2011), the first woman to obtain a PhD in East and Central Africa, was a scholar, and an environmental and human rights activist.

In 1977, she founded the Green Belt Movement, a non-governmental organization, which encourages women to plant trees to combat deforestation and environmental degradation. To date, the Green Belt Movement has planted over 50 million trees.



Photograph by Martin Rowe, 2002.



In the face of regular opposition, she succeeded in deepening and expanding her engagement with local communities through an impressive network of regional and international alliances, which made the Green Belt Movement a model women's organization.



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Increasingly aware that the environment was directly linked to issues of governance, peace and human rights,

Maathai began to use her organization as a springboard in the struggle against abuses of power, such as land-grabbing or the illegal detention of political opponents.

She was eventually elected as a Member of Parliament upon Kenya's effective return to multiparty democracy in 2002, also serving as assistant Minister in the Ministry for Environmental and Natural Resources.

In 2004, she was the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.



Wangari Maathai at the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference. Photograph by Mark Garten/United Nations, 2009.