WANGARI MAATHAI

Throughout Africa (as in much of the world) women hold primary responsibility for tilling the fields, deciding what to plant, nurturing the crops, and harvesting the food. They are the first to become aware of environmental damage that harms agricultural production: If the well goes dry, they are the ones concerned about finding new sources of water and who must walk long distances to fetch it. As mothers, they notice when the food they feed their family is tainted with pollutants or impurities: they can see it in the tears of their children and hear it in their babies' cries. Wangari Maathai, Kenya's foremost environmentalist and women's rights advocate, founded the Green Belt Movement on Earth Day 1977, encouraging farmers (70 percent of whom are women) to plant "greenbelts" to stop soil erosion, provide shade, and create a source of lumber and firewood. She distributed seedlings to rural women and set up an incentive system for each seedling that survived. To date, the movement has planted more than fifteen million trees, produced income for eighty thousand people in Kenya alone, and has expanded its efforts to more than thirty African countries, the United States, and Haiti. Maathai won the Africa Prize for her work in preventing hunger, and was heralded by the Kenyan government—controlled press as an exemplary citizen. A few years later, when Maathai denounced President Daniel Toroitich arap Moi's proposal to erect a sixty-two-story skyscraper in the middle of Nairobi's largest park (graced by a four-story statue of Moi himself), officials warned her to curtail her criticism. When she took her campaign public, she was visited by security forces. When she still refused to be silenced, she was subjected to a harassment campaign and threats. Members of parliament denounced Maathai, dismissing her organization as "a bunch of divorcées." The government-run newspaper questioned her sexual past, and police detained and interrogated her, without ever pressing charges. Eventually Moi was forced to forego the project, in large measure because of the pressure Maathai successfully generated. Years later, when she returned to the park to lead a rally on behalf of political prisoners, Maathai was hospitalized after pro-government thugs beat her and other women protesters. Following the incident, Moi's ruling party parliamentarians threatened to mutilate her genitals in order to force Maathai to behave "like women should." But Wangari Maathai was more determined than ever, and continued her work for environmental protection, women's rights, and democratic reform. From one seedling, an organization for empowerment and political participation has grown many strong branches. In 2004 Maathai received the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her efforts.

In 2005, Maathai was selected to preside over the African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council. She was named one of the 100 most influential people by *Time* magazine and one of the 100 most powerful women by *Forbes* magazine. She was honored in 2006 with the Legion d'Honneur, France's highest award. Wangari Maathai died in September 2011 while undergoing cancer treatment at the age of 71.



Wangari Maathai, © 2000 Eddie Adams

"YOU NEED TO TAKE ACTION. YOU HAVE TO INFORM YOURSELF. YOU ARE WILLING TO INQUIRE; YOU ARE WILLING TO LEARN. YOU HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO CONTROL THE DIRECTION OF YOUR OWN LIFE."

INTERVIEW TAKEN FROM KERRY KENNEDY'S BOOK SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER, 2000

The Green Belt Movement in Kenya started in 1977 when women from rural areas and urban centers, reflecting on their needs at organized forums, spoke about environmental degradation. They did not have firewood. They needed fruits to cure malnutrition in their children. They needed clean drinking water, but the pesticides and herbicides used on farms to grow cash crops polluted the water.

The women talked about how, a long time ago, they did not have to spend so much time going out to collect firewood, that they lived near the forest. They spoke of how, once, they ate food that sustained their health. Now, while the food does not require much energy to grow, it does not sustain them. The women feel their families are now very weak, cannot resist diseases, and that their bodies are impoverished because of an environment that is degraded.

The National Council of Women, a non-governmental organization, responded by encouraging them to plant trees. In the beginning it was difficult because the women felt that they had neither the knowledge, the technology, nor the capital to do this. But, we quickly showed them that we did not need all of that to plant trees, which made the tree-planting process a wonderful symbol of hope. Tree-planting empowered these women because it was not a complicated thing. It was something that they could do and see the results of. They could, by their own actions, improve the quality of their lives.

When we said we wanted to plant fifteen million trees, a forester laughed and said we could have as many seedlings as we wanted because he was convinced that we could not plant that many trees. Before too long, he had to withdraw that offer because we were collecting more trees than he could give away free of charge. But we didn't have money. We decided that we could produce the seedlings ourselves. We would go and collect seeds from the trees, come back and plant them the way women did other seeds: beans, corn, and other grains. And so the women actually developed forestry management techniques, using "appropriate technology" to fit their needs. Here is the basic method: take a pot, put in the soil, and put in the seeds. Put the pot in an elevated position so that the chickens and the goats don't come and eat the seedlings.

This method worked! Some day we will record all the inventive techniques that the women developed. For example, sometimes trees produce seeds carried by the wind. These germinate in the fields with the first rain. It was very interesting to see a woman cultivating a field with a small container of water. But, she was cultivating weeds! She had learned that among these weeds were also tree seedlings, and that she could pick the seedlings and put them in a container. In the evening, she went home with several hundred seedling trees! These techniques developed by the women became extremely helpful. We planted more than twenty million trees in Kenya alone. In other African countries, we have not kept records.

Trees are alive, so we react to them in very different ways. Quite often, we get attached to a tree, because it gives us food and fodder for our fires. It is such a friendly thing. When you plant a tree and you see it grow, something happens to you. You want to protect it, and you value it. I have seen people really change and look at trees very differently from the way they would in the past. The other thing is that a lot of people do not see that there are no trees until they open their eyes, and realize that the land is naked. They begin to see that while rain can be a blessing, it can also be a curse, because when it comes and you have not protected your soil, it carries the soil away with it! And this is the rich soil in which you should be growing your food. They see the immediate relationship between a person and the environment. It is wonderful to see that transformation, and that is what sustains the movement!

We have started programs in about twenty countries. The main focus is how ordinary people can be mobilized to do something for the environment. It is mainly an education program, and implicit in the action of planting trees is a civic education, a strategy to empower people and to give them a sense of taking their destiny into their own hands, removing their fear, so that they can stand up for themselves and for their environmental rights. The strategy we use is a strategy that we call the "wrong bus syndrome," a simple analogy to help people conceive what is going on. People come to see us with a lot of problems: they have no food, they are hungry, their water is dirty, their infrastructure has broken down, they do not have water for their animals, they cannot take their children to school. The highest number of problems I have recorded at a sitting of about a hundred people is one hundred and fifty. They really think we are going to solve their problems. I just write them down, but I am not going to do anything about them. I just write them down in order to give the people a feeling of relief and a forum where they can express their problems.

After we list these problems, we ask, "Where do you think these problems come from?" Some people blame the government, fingering the governor or the president or his ministers. Blame is placed on the side that has the power. The people do not think that they, themselves, may be contributing to the problem. So, we use the bus symbol (because it is a very common method of transportation in the country). If you go onto the wrong bus, you end up at the wrong destination. You may be very hungry because you do not have any money. You may, of course, be saved by the person you were going to visit, but you may also be arrested by the police for hanging around and looking like you are lost! You may be mugged—anything can happen to you! We ask the people, "What could possibly make you get on the wrong bus? How can you walk into a bus station and instead of taking the right bus, take the wrong one?" Now, this is a very ordinary experience. The most common reason for people to be on the wrong bus is that they do not know how to read and write. If you are afraid, you can get onto the wrong bus. If you are arrogant, if you think you know it all, you can easily make a mistake and get onto the wrong bus. If you are not mentally alert, not focused. There are many reasons.

After we go through this exercise, we ask them to look at all the problems that they have listed. Why are we hungry? Why are we harassed by the police? We cannot hold meetings without a license. When we look at all of this, we realize that we are in the wrong bus. We have been misinformed for too long. The history of Kenya in the last forty years explains why.

During the Cold War period, our government became very dictatorial. There was only one radio station that gave out controlled information and our country was misinformed. Because the government was so oppressive, fear was instilled in us, and we very easily got onto the wrong bus. We made mistakes and created all of these problems for ourselves. We did not look at the environment and decide to plant trees, so our land was washed away by the rain! The beautiful topsoil was lost. Then, we had made the mistake. Maybe we were not fully focused, suffered from alcoholism, or were not working, but our personal problems had nothing to do with government. We got on the wrong bus and a lot of bad things happened. What we needed to do was to decide to get out, only to make the best of the situation you find yourself in.

You need to take action. You have to inform yourself. And you are willing to inquire; you are willing to learn. That is why you came to the seminar. You want to plant, you want to empower yourself. You have every right to read what you want to read. You want to meet without asking permission. To get off the bus means to control the direction of your own life.

We say to go ahead and start to plant trees. Grow and produce enough food for your family. Get in the food security project, making sure that you plant a lot of indigenous food crops so that we do not lose local biodiversity. We are working in the tropics so the trees grow very fast. In five years, or less, you can have fruit trees, like banana trees. You can go and teach others what you have learned here so that you will have educational outreach in the village. We will support you, so that you can encourage others to get off the bus. You can get a small group of people to protect a park or a forest or an open space near you. Environmental protection is not just about talking. It is also about taking action.

People who live near the forest are among the first to see that the forest is being destroyed. People who live near water resources are the ones who notice that these springs are being interfered with. People who are farmers recognize that the soil is being exposed and carried away by the rains. These are the people who should be the ones to draw attention to these problems at the local and national levels.

And this is the process I have seen with the Green Belt Movement. Women who start to plant trees on their farms influence their neighbors. The neighbors eventually become involved. At the national level, we have been able to draw the attention of the parliament, and even the president, to the need to protect the environment! And now, we see the government reacting to what the environmentalists are saying: that the remaining forest not be degraded, that open spaces not be privatized, and that the forest not be interfered with or privatized. This pressure is coming from ordinary people. We started by empowering women. Then the men joined in because they saw that the women were doing some very positive work.

A lot of men participate in the planting, though not in the nurturing of the seedlings at the nursery as the women do (and do very well). The men see trees as an economic investment. They look thirty years into the future and see that they will have huge trees to sell. Well, nevertheless, it means that the Green Belt Movement enjoys the participation of men, women, and children, which is important. You could very easily have the women planting trees and the men cutting the trees down! Everyone needs to work together and to protect the environment together.

When you start doing this work, you do it with a very pure heart, out of compassion. Listen to the statement from our pamphlet: “The main objective of this organization is to raise the consciousness of our people to the level which moves them to do the right things for the environment because their hearts have been touched and their minds convinced to do the right things, because it is the only logical thing to do.”

The clarity of what you ought to do gives you courage, removes the fear, gives you the courage to ask. There is so much you do not know. And you need to know. And it helps you get your mind focused. Now, you are out of the bus and moving to the right direction. They will see you move with passion, conviction, and persistence. You are very focused. Quite often you threaten people, either people who are on the wrong bus or people who are driving others, because you know they are driving people in the wrong direction and you are asking them not to follow. And now you feel free to tell people, “Believe me, you are all moving in the wrong direction, your leader as well.” Now, of course, a leader does not want to be told this. He certainly does not want to hear the people he is driving being told they need to get out of the bus. This is where the conflict comes in. The leader accuses you of misleading his people, misrepresenting his vision, misrepresenting what he’s trying to do, misrepresenting him.

This is what happened between me and President Moi. In 1989, the president wanted to take over Uhuru Park, the only park left in Nairobi. He was going to build the highest building in Africa, sixty-two stories. Next to the skyscraper he was going to put a four-story statue of himself (so you could pat his head from the fourth floor). All of downtown Nairobi would have had to be restructured.

That building would have been so intimidating, that even if some land in the small park remained, no one would have dared come near it. Very intimidating. So it was completely wrong. It also would have been an economic disaster, as was borrowing money to do it, putting us in greater debt. It was truly a white elephant. But he wanted it because it was a personal aggrandizement.

And so we raised objections, and said this was the only park that we had in the city where people who have no money could come. Not even a policeman could ask you to move; it was an open space. A lot of people joined in and agreed, even those people who were going to invest, who then decided that it was probably not a very good idea.

We staged a protest in the park and were beaten by the police. We were only a small group of women, because, at that time, in 1989, there was a lot of fear. I had taken the matter to court, arguing that this park belonged to the people and that it could not be privatized. The president was only a public trustee, so for him to now go and take what had been entrusted to him, to take it, and privatize it, was criminal. We lost the case, which in the court meant that we had no business raising the issue and complaining about the park. But we won in the end because those who were providing the money withdrew due to the outcry from the public. And members of parliament actually suspended business to discuss the Green Belt Movement and myself, recommending that the Green Belt Movement should be banned as a subversive organization. They did a lot of dirty campaigning to discredit us, including dismissing us as, "a bunch of divorcées and irresponsible women."

Well, I gave them a piece of my mind that people kept talking about for the rest of the time. "Whatever else you may think about the women who run the Green Belt Movement," I said, "we are dealing here with privatizing or not privatizing a public park. We are dealing with the rights of the public and the rights of the people. These are the kind of issues that require the anatomy of whatever lies above the neck." The press loved it. Parliament was just being mean, chauvinistic, and downright dirty. Fortunately, my skin is thick, like an elephant's. The more they abused and ridiculed me, the more they hardened me. I know I was right, and they were wrong.

A few years later, in 1992, with about ten women whose sons had been detained for demanding more democratic rights for the people, I went back to the same park and declared it "freedom corner." We stayed there for four days. By the fifth day the government brought in policemen; some of us were very badly beaten. But I will always remember the power of those women. After we were disrupted by the police, I ended up in the hospital, so I didn't even know what was going on. The other women were herded into cars and forced to go back to where they had come. But the following day, those women came back to Nairobi and tried to locate the others. They knew some were in the hospital, and sent a message that they were waiting for us. They would not go home. Instead, they went to the Anglican provost of All Saint's Cathedral who told them they could go to the crypt and wait for the other women. Though the provost thought this would be a two-night stay, it lasted for one year. They stayed in that crypt, waiting for Moi to release their sons. The authorities tried everything to get the women to leave. They tried to bribe some of them; intimidated them; even sent some of their sons to persuade their mothers to leave. Several times we were surrounded by armed policemen, who threatened to break the doors of the church and to haul us out. Fortunately they never did, because some of these soldiers were Christians, and we could hear them say they just could not break into the church.

LOST THERE, FELT HERE: PROTECTING THE LUNGS OF OUR PLANET
WANGARI MAATHAI

LESSON GRADE LEVEL: 6–8
HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE: ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS:
- Article 20: Right of Peaceful Assembly and Association
- Article 27: Right to Participate in the Cultural Life of the Community

GUIDING QUESTIONS:
- What are the goals and purpose of the Green Belt Movement?
- How is Wangari Maathai a courageous person?
- How does deforestation affect my life and the lives of all human beings?

TIME REQUIREMENT FOR THE LESSON: 80 minutes (2 class periods)

OBJECTIVES:
After this lesson, students will be able to:
- Relate the concepts of deforestation to their own lives.
- Evaluate and apply vocabulary words to facilitate generalization and comprehension of Wangari Maathai's human rights work.
- Collect data, facts, and ideas on the environmental issue of global warming and the empowerment of women.
- Develop and synthesize information with supporting materials to create an original letter or film.
- Produce an original film or letter focused on the concepts of deforestation and its negative global impact.
- Listen, speak, and advocate about the environmental work implemented by Wangari Maathai.

COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS:
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7

VOCABULARY:
- Deforestation
- Advocate
- Environmentalist
- Soil erosion
- Incentive
- Exemplary
- Denounce
- Proposal
- Erect
- Curtail
- Criticism
- Detained
- Compassion
- Clarity
- Courage
- Destiny
- Interrogated
- Forego
- Reform degradation
- Malnutrition
- Impoverished
- Capital
- Empower
- Destiny
- Infrastructure
- Arrogant
- Conviction
- Rural

CONCEPTS:
- Courage
- Fear
- Perseverance
- Empowerment
- Empathy
- Physical systems
- Human systems
- Environment and society
- Justice
- Civic values
- Human rights

TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED:
- Computer with Internet connection
- CD player and CD/or Internet connection to a music link

MATERIALS:
- Tracy Chapman—"Paper and Ink" music and lyrics **http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=LDqrjlqTyw0**
- Transcript of Kerry Kennedy's speech at Cooper Union (along with Wangari Maathi's speech)
- The video "Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement": **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQU7JOxkGvo**
- Wangari Maathi interview **www.RFKHumanRights.org / click on Speak Truth to Power / click on "Defenders" tab**
- The video clip on deforestation "Long Hi Rez: Saving Our Rainforests — The Lungs of Our Planet: **http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ib1BNqj7eA**
- A video clip about the Mottainai Campaign: **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMw-fP_GRP8&feature=player_embedded**

ANTICIPATORY SET:
Distribute to students lyrics to the song "Paper and Ink" by Tracy Chapman. Have students listen to the song while they follow along with the lyrics:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDqrjlqTyw0

After listening to the song, conduct a classroom discussion using the following questions:

- How many sheets of paper do you think you use in one day?
- How many sheets of paper do you think your school uses in one day?
- In one week? A year?
- Who owns the sun?
- Who owns the sea?

ACTIVITY 1:

- Have students listen and read along to a speech by Kerry Kennedy at Cooper Union with regard to the right of access for all throughout history, and how environmental exploitation is directly linked to human rights violations. Transcript: **http://greenbeltmovement.org.**
- Students watch the video clip on deforestation: "Long Hi Rez: Saving Our Rainforests—The Lungs of Our Planet," with Harrison Ford **http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ib1BNqj7eA**
- Instruct students to respond to the video while watching by writing reactions to what they see.
- Students share responses in a group discussion.

ACTIVITY 2:

- Working in teams of three, students divide words and find definitions. Students share as a class.

ACTIVITY 3:

- Students read the interview of Wangari Maathai and answer the following discussion questions. **www.RFKHumanRights.org / click on Speak Truth to Power / click on "Defenders" tab**
- Questions:
  - What was the name of the movement Maathai created and what was its purpose?
  - For how many people did the planting of a billion trees produce income?
  - Explain the sequence of events that occurred when Maathai denounced President Daniel arap Moi's proposal to build a 62-story skyscraper in the middle of Nairobi's largest park.
  - What was the result of her perseverance in regard to speaking out and taking action?
  - What were the initial needs resulting from environmental degradation that women spoke about in 1977?
  - Compare and contrast how women describe their environmental situation in the past to their environmental situation today.
  - Why did the women initially believe they would not be able to plant trees?
  - How did planting trees empower women?
  - How and why were women an important factor in the Green Belt Movement?
  - Why did the forester laugh about the number of trees they wanted to plant?
  - Why did the forester withdraw his offer of unlimited seedlings?
  - Explain why Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement did not need the forester's seedlings anymore.
  - Explain the goals and purpose of the Green Belt Movement.
  - Explain the ways in which Wangari Maathai was courageous.
  - Interpret Maathai's statement, "Fear is the biggest enemy you have."
- Students share answers in a class discussion and then watch a video entitled "Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement" **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQU7JOxkGvo**
- Students discuss answers to questions and the video.

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK

Since the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations (UN) in 1948, many other international documents—also called treaties, covenants, resolutions, or conventions—have been drafted to develop these rights further. Countries commit to protect the rights recognized in these treaties by 'ratifying' them and sometimes a specific institution is created within the UN to monitor their compliance.

Here are examples of relevant international documents:

INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS (ICCPR)

- **Article 19:** Freedom of Expression
- **Article 21:** Freedom of Assembly
- **Article 22:** Freedom of Association

INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS (ICESCR)

For more information, visit the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' website: **www.ohchr.org**

BECOME A DEFENDER

- Students will watch the video clip entitled "Wangari Maathai talks about the Mottainai Campaign." Mottainai is a Japanese word for reduce, reuse, recycle. Wangari Maathai started this campaign to reduce the millions of thin plastic bags contributing to the degradation of our society. **http://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=KMw-fP_GRP8&feature=player_embedded**
- Students will create PSAs (public service announcements) to raise awareness in their own communities about using reusable bags.
- Students will take action to raise awareness of the Mottainai Campaign in their own neighborhoods by writing letters and taking them to supermarkets and other stores that use plastic bags and requesting that the store sell reusable bags and offer incentives to use them. (Whole Foods give 10 cents per reusable bag back to the consumer.)
- Students will either write a persuasive letter or create a short film to send to their senators to ask them to join the global climate task force of governors and R.E.D.D. (Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation), to include forests in their Climate Agreement, and to show how the degradation of forests affects all human beings.
- Students will participate in the Billion Trees Campaign and plant a tree in their community. **http://www.unep.org/billiontreecampaign/** **http://www.tree-planting.com/tree-planting-4.htm**
- Students create a visual interpretation of the Billion Trees Campaign to display in their school.
- Students create a poem about deforestation and its negative impact on humanity (while personifying the Earth as having lungs) then create a visual interpretation to connect to the poem.
- Students may volunteer in International Coastal Cleanup Day in their own neighborhoods. This is the only documented cleanup in the world! **http://www.oceanconservancy.org/our-work/international-coastal-cleanup/**
- Students may interview their local recycle truck driver to find out more about where plastic bags end up.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Baskets of Africa:
www.basketsofafrica.com
Baskets of Africa represents African basket weavers throughout the continent. They serve as a means of communication between customers and the weavers who hand-weave the baskets to ensure the weavers are fairly compensated and to help weavers, especially women, achieve financial success and independence.

The Green Belt Movement:
www.greenbeltmovement.org
The Green Belt Movement is a Kenya-based women's civil society organization dedicated to human rights, good governance and peaceful democratic change through environmental protection. This organization works to preserve and restore the biodiversity of Africa while also planting over 40 million trees in an effort to prevent soil erosion. Through all of these actions, the Green Belt Movement has also empowered hundreds of thousands of women and their families to stand up for their rights.