

Keswick Reminder 14.03.25: NfWW No.82 Africa's great restoration success story

‘ “Nature is the source of everything good,” my mother told me. Regreening Africa is not only possible it is essential. It is our life support system.’ (Wanjira Mathai, Managing Director for Global and Africa Partnerships, World Resources Institute.)

With droughts and floods, wars and famines, and now on the front line of climate change, Africa gets a pretty bad press. So as a counterpoint, here is an inspiring story from Kenya.

In the 1970s, rural women there started to face many shared hardships. These hardships, which were first recognised by Wangari Maathai, pioneering environmentalist, academic and mother of Wanjira (quoted above), resulted from severe soil degradation, deforestation, water scarcity and polluted rivers.

Wangari Maathai's response to these crises was both elegantly simple and hugely ambitious: to create a countrywide movement of women to address deforestation and environmental destruction.

So, on 5 June 1977, marking World Environment Day, the National Council of Women of Kenya marched in a procession to Kamukunji Park on the outskirts of Nairobi, where they planted seven trees in honour of historical community leaders. Thus was born the 'Green Belt Movement'.

Wangari's idea was that women would be trained and paid to plant trees in their local communities, creating a direct link between environmental restoration and economic opportunity. Each tree planted would serve multiple purposes, preventing soil erosion, providing firewood, creating shade, and improving agricultural conditions overall.

As importantly, the initiative gave women a source of income and a sense of environmental and personal agency.

By 2004, the year in which Wangari Maathai received the Nobel Peace Prize (the first African woman to do so), the Green Belt Movement had achieved remarkable milestones. Over 30 million trees had been planted across the country, transforming barren landscapes into green, productive environments.

The tally of trees now planted is over 50 million with the involvement of 4,000 community organisations, an extraordinary feat in a country whose annual average income is around £1,500.

In time, Green Belt's impact extended far beyond tree planting. It became a model of grassroots environmental activism across and beyond Africa, demonstrating how local communities could be directly involved in a multitude of small scale conservation efforts.

Wangari's work, however, did not go unchallenged. She faced significant opposition from Kenya's powerful political elite, with harassment and even imprisonment for her activist work. But her unwavering commitment to environmental and social justice made her a formidable, global figure in environmental, women's and human rights circles.

Tragically Wangari died in 2011, aged 71, but her Green Belt Movement flourishes, and her work has been continued by a number of Kenyan women including her daughter, Wanjira.

In the material sense they may not be rich but the women of the Green Belt Movement have much to teach us.

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