



## Forestry protection and conservation are very much about what you love



It's quite simple really. You want to protect the things you love. And just what you love is often determined in very early childhood. Wanjira Mathai talked to Silvia Richter about imparting values, the importance of role models and the potency of empowerment.

### **Ms Mathai, for years you have been engaged in showing people the significance of intact forests. Why is this topic so important to you?**

One aspect is that to me, food security and forest integrity are inextricably linked. Because, especially in countries like ours on the African continent, food production is largely

reliant on rainfed agriculture. We are dependent on the climate – a climate which was very well understood and predictable in the past. We knew that the rain would come in March, so there were certain things you had to do on the land by March. In March, April, and May, you had rains. But that is very closely related to the integrity of forest systems. Forests are part of the climatic cycle. Without them, you are unable to create the conditions that bring rain, which is also needed to feed the rivers. A lot of agriculture depends on the water that is flowing in the rivers. So food production and intact forests are very closely linked.

### **But agriculture is often also a cause of forest loss ...**

Food production for sustenance is very rarely a cause for forest degradation. It is only recently that people have been encroaching into forests to grow their food. With good agricultural practices, you could grow your food on the farm. And in fact, it is sometimes quite a distance to the forest. But the soils there a lot more fertile, so it might be easier to produce food there. However, the forest has a different role. It is a conservation platform. And if you don't have the forest, you will very quickly begin to see that your food production is affected.

### **So you don't really see a conflict here?**

I don't see a conflict with small-scale agriculture. I think the conflict has come where enforcement has broken down, and with the advent of commercial agriculture. Where people have

been allowed to go into the forest and begin to graze their animals or to grow food instead of practising agriculture the way it should be. We should be focusing on how we can engage in more efficient agriculture, on how we can increase agroforestry practices on our farm, so that we have fodder and food as well as an environment within our farms that is facilitating our growing of food.

There was a time when we knew about crop rotation, when we knew that you needed to plant beans so that you could return the nitrogen into the soil. I think we have lost that knowledge. Many countries in Africa have lost their agricultural extension services, which used to be instrumental in ensuring that farmers got the information they needed to farm correctly – not to farm too close to the river, not to grow the same thing all the time, to intercrop and apply all the other practices. But instead, people have abandoned what they were farming and sometimes moved to the most sensitive areas – not necessarily because they had to. Often, this happens because we are not optimising agriculture where we live and where we should be. Technology has improved, and knowledge has improved. I would rather invest in extension services and in ensuring that farmers are well informed and are able to grow their food. And let the forests play the role they need to play.

### **Let's talk about the Green Belt Movement. Women's empowerment has always played a big role in it. Why?**

Women are on the frontline of food production, energy security and water security – the three things that you absolutely must have. And the founding of the GBM in 1977 was an acknowledgement that these three elements of the survival toolkit were threatened. Women were saying that they had to walk further and further away to get water, they didn't have fuel and they certainly didn't have nutritious food for their children. And all of this creates a really dangerous situation. But it is the women who were feeling the pinch. So women became the very first responders to this call. Men subsequently joined the Movement as well. But women were always the ones who

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Senior Advisor on Forest Restoration for the World Resources Institute (WRI). For close to six years, she led the board of the Green Belt Movement (GBM), an environmental grassroots organisation that was founded by her mother, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Wangari Maathai, in 1977 under the auspices of the National Council of Women of Kenya. The Green Belt Movement still empowers communities, particularly women, to conserve the environment and improve livelihoods. Today, Wanjira Mathai chairs the Board of the Wangari Maathai Foundation which was started by the Maathai Family and the Green Belt Movement, to nurture a culture of purpose and integrity in youth and children.





With its activities, the Wangari Maathai Foundation above all seeks to reach out to young people – the leaders of tomorrow.

Photo: WMF

were saying: “Wait a minute, there is something wrong with what I see.” And especially women who were older would say: “It was not always this way.” I remember my mother always telling me how she used to run down the hill to fetch fresh water from the river. As a child, she would spend hours playing with tadpoles and frogspawn in the river. Now we know that some of these are what we call indicator species for fresh water. They don’t live in filthy water. That source of water was very close by, which meant that my mother was able to fetch water quickly. So to hear women talking about having to walk further for water was really surprising to my mother.

I think that it has a lot to do with the fact that women feel the pressures of this degradation much more than the men do. And so they are the ones who respond, and also the ones that we target. They are most responsive. They absolutely took on the Movement like a wildfire. In many ways, it has become a source of social, emotional connection with other women because they work in groups and they share stories and much more. One plus one is three – it is so much more they gain!

### **Why do you think has the Movement been so successful?**

The GBM really believes that change will only come when people understand the underlying root causes of things. It has always seen empowerment as understanding what the problems we are facing are and how they link to the degradation of the land. And once you have made that connection, you never forget. To this day, I have been to places where women say: “Forests attract clouds. Without these forests, we would lose these clouds, and without these clouds, we have no rain.” It’s that connection that they begin to make. And that’s empowerment. Because long after you’re gone, they are still at it. Nobody will come and tell them something different. And that investment in empowerment is very much

a signature piece of the Green Belt Movement’s success.

### **Do you think that the role of women in communities has changed over the last few years – and with the work of the GBM?**

Well, we have seen some changes in the governance system in Kenya, which has opened new opportunities for women. But what we have also found is that women who have been empowered – like the women of the GBM – have changed their behaviour. When an opportunity comes for them to be in leadership they put themselves forward. And this a big thing for women, who often censor themselves and don’t even put themselves in the running. Often, they are not going to be considered, but not because they are not good enough, but because they decide there is someone stronger than them out there. Self-censorship. But now they are showing up, they are putting themselves forward. They say: “Why not, I can do this.” And they assume local leadership, whether in chairing their GBM group or chairing their women’s church group. Kenya’s new 2011 constitution created new opportunities for women and women’s representation. There are many women in the GBM who are prepared and who are putting themselves forward now. These women were inspired by what they had seen with the leadership of the Green Belt Movement and Wangari Maathai herself.

I think empowerment is when you can see your own potential and then say: “I’m going to stand for this seat, I’m going to put my hand up to be the chair of this group, I want to be the treasurer, I want to be one of the officials.” It was uncommon for women to do so. If you have a group of ten and three of them are men, then one will be the chair, the other one will be the treasurer, and the third one will be the secretary. No, wait ... the secretary might be a woman ... But we see the changes with the kind of empowerment that the movement has

brought about, not even deliberately, almost like a side effect.

### **The legacy of your mother is also maintained by the Wangari Maathai Foundation. How does it differ from the GBM?**

Africa has an increasingly young population. According to the East African Youth Survey, 80 per cent of Kenya’s population is under the age of 35. These young people will be in charge – if they are not already. They are innovating, they are just thinking differently. We at the Foundation believe that the opportunity here is to begin to influence what their value systems are. I love the quote by Senegalese environmentalist Baba Dioum who said: “In the end, we will conserve only what we love. We love what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.” So how do you educate children to understand what they might love, what they might conserve? For if you do that, you don’t have to bang your head against the wall, because the minister for the environment already loves the forest! You won’t have to convince him or her.

So we use Wangari Maathai’s life and work as a metaphor. Who was she? Why was she the way she was? Those who knew my mother knew that she was definitely crazy about forests. She loved them and understood profoundly the role they played in the ecosystem and for humans. So the Foundation’s work is very much linked to what the Green Belt Movement is doing, except that it approaches it from a different angle – youth and children AND the underlying values and character traits that guide us.

### **What exactly does the Foundation do?**

Essentially, the Foundation is working to build character and personal leadership in children and youth. And we do this in two different ways. We divide the work into two main age groups: children from ten to seventeen years of age and then people from eighteen to thirty-five.

In the 10 to 17 age group we have the Wanakesho Program. In Swahili, this means “the children of tomorrow”. These are our future generations. For them, we have a school-based initiative that works on life skills training to build traits that we have mapped out from Wangari Maathai’s life. We have created our own curriculum that focuses on character and personal leadership and have infused it with emotional intelligence content from our partners Six Seconds. We’ve identified eight character traits of Wangari Maathai: courage and



confidence, honesty and integrity, resilience, creativity and resourcefulness, gratitude, commitment to excellence, service to others, and responsible stewardship. And then we create programming around these values. And since these young people have identified Wangari Maathai as a role model, we unpack who she was. So while the GBM is about what Wangari Maathai did, the Foundation is about who she was. She was an environmentalist working with women to advance the cause for forests and landscapes. But why did she do this? What values drove her? Who was she really? Where could all this have come from? And can we actually code this and share it with children as we invest in the future?

We are piloting this work with teachers of four schools in Kenya. We coach and mentor them because they are the custodians of learning. The curriculum is currently in its pilot phase. Our hope is to get the teachers to create opportunities for the kids to develop certain character attributes that we believe in, for instance when it comes to courage and standing up for what they believe.

#### **And the older people?**

For those between 18 and 35 years of age, we are developing a gap year programme for young women and men before they go to university. We envision putting them through a wilderness experience, a character development and leadership course, and an entrepreneurship and self-awareness programme. This gap year programme will be called “The Savannah Stars”. The programme is still in development, inspired by “Desert Stars” in Israel. Very exciting! It is about the premise that I mentioned in that earlier quote by Baba Dioum – that we can actually influence how young people will “show up” when they are in leadership.

#### **What are the current leaders doing wrong?**

The reason why we can’t get compliance with some of our ambitious forestry targets is because there is no political will, there is no interest. And this has a lot to do with the character of the leadership. If they don’t understand why this is an important topic, how would the rest of the population understand?

Gus Speth, an American environmentalist who is the founder of the World Resources Institute, said: “I thought the greatest environmental challenges were climate change, ecosystem collapse and biodiversity loss. But I was wrong. The biggest environmental challenges are greed, selfishness and apathy.” Isn’t that the

truth? The reason we are fighting in Kenya to protect forests and urban green spaces is because of the greed and selfishness of a few who have decided private gain is the priority. That’s greed. So I really like this idea that character could be an opportunity for us to begin to think about leadership across the board.

#### **How do you assess the situation in Kenya?**

I think Kenya is doing a much better job than many, but we have still lost quite a bit of forest, and our urban green spaces are also constantly under attack. There is not a very clear understanding why this should be non-negotiable in some cases. And of course there are sensitivities, where you have local communities living or just having been settled in forest land. And as difficult as it is, we have to deal with it. It cannot be ignored.

I haven’t always been working in environment. I spent quite some time working in disease eradication. When there is a disease epidemic, everything stops, people go into emergency mode, and that is what we need now with regard to forests. People need to go into emergency mode. We cannot say: “This is an option, maybe ...” No! If it is true that this forest being logged is a critical piece in the survival equation, that our survival depends on the survival of this forest, that the impacts of climate change will be so catastrophic as to destroy life as we know it, then we have to sit up and take notice. We have to organise how people will be moved or resettled. Of course we cannot be inhumane about how we conduct our forestry. In areas where communities are vulnerable and they have been living in the forest, we have to decide that maybe they must stay there. But then we have to recover that forest piece from somewhere else. How can we make sure that there is something like a land-swap to compensate for land that is impossible to recover? I believe in land swaps. We need the forest in its integrity. It may be costly, but it needs to be done. Because if it was an epidemic, we would not be discussing things, we would be taking immediate action.

#### **Are the forest restoration initiatives initiated by the international community doing justice to the urgency of the situation?**

In 2011 the German Environment Ministry was instrumental in launching the Bonn Challenge. This literally triggered the subsequent setting up in 2014, during the UN Climate Summit, of the UN Forest Declaration. So with the Bonn Challenge, Germany had already stepped forward with a commitment to

restore 150 million hectares by 2020, and now we have 350 million hectares by 2030. More recently, the AFR100 initiative was launched, with the German Development Ministry and the WRI providing initial funding. The African Union endorsed the initiative, and now we have 28 countries and over a 100 million hectares in commitment. We have surpassed what we expected. Now the big task that I and many others have is to see those commitments translated into interventions on the ground.

#### **So you are satisfied with the work of the international community?**

I am grateful to the international community for helping us all set ambitious targets. There is a lot they have done. And there is still a lot more that they can do, especially in financing, in making finance a little bit more accessible. Public financing, private financing. We haven’t been able to really see the impact of REDD+ financing for example because it is so difficult to obtain.

But another role the international community plays is in terms of consumers. There is a huge opportunity for us as consumers to demand certain products. One of the things which I am really enjoying being in Europe now and which is also growing in Kenya is precisely the demand that consumers are putting on what they will (or will not) eat, the decision on where they will put their money. Because ultimately the private sector – whether it be coffee, tea, palm oil or soya – they are responding to the demands of their customers. And we are the customers. It is a lot more prolific here in Europe, where you see people saying: “Label everything so I know which one has sustainable soya because this is the one I will buy.” There is still a long way to go, but I think that is the beginning of a revolution which will create the necessary pressure to bring about change. We are forcing producers to clean up their value chains. And that is satisfying.

We have a lot more power than we think we have. That needs to happen in the West, but it also needs to happen at home. Because the very same suppliers cannot be given a cut at home. We also have to say “No”. We cannot give money to counties that are deforesting. If that county is deforesting, don’t send my money there. So we need to begin to use our voices as consumers to demand responsibility. Because then – as we have seen it with soya in many cases – the suppliers will begin to cave in and reform.