

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

WANGARI MUTA MAATHAI

environmental justice activist, professor, and grassroots organizer

"You cannot protect the environment unless you empower people, you inform them, and you help them understand that these resources are their own, that they must protect them."

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COURTESY OF THE LITTLE SUN

Background Information

Born: April 1, 1940; Died: September 25, 2011

Wangari Maathai was born in 1940 and raised in Nyeri County, Kenya.ⁱ She received a bachelor's from Mount St. Scholastica College, master's from the University of Pittsburgh, and doctorate degree from the University of Nairobi, making East African woman to do so.ⁱⁱ She was the first woman to hold an associate professor position at the University of Nairobi.ⁱⁱⁱ Maathai served as a chair member of the National Council of Women of Kenya and the Environmental Liaison Center.^{iv} Her activism focused

on local grassroots organizations fighting for human rights, environmental conservation, and eradicating poverty.

Maathai's Resistance

Through Maathai's intensive involvement with different organizations, she connected societal problems like poverty and environmental degradation caused by ongoing, historical colonial processes.^v Maathai addressed these issues through organizing community-based tree planting projects that gave women a small stipend to plant trees throughout Kenya and alleviated the problem of deforestation.^{vi} This project grew and eventually became the Green Belt Movement, which provided work opportunities for the poor. The Green Belt Movement also improved the environmental quality through tree planting.^{vii} The Kenyan government frequently discredited Maathai's actions, despite her receiving international recognition for her work.^{viii} Maathai was beaten, threatened, and jailed for speaking out against corporate business land grabbing, governmental corruption, and sexism.^{ix} Despite facing dangerous barriers, Maathai became an Assistant Minister of Environment and Natural Resources in Kenya's parliament.^x She was also a vocal advocate of women's rights, environmental conservation, and democracy.^{xi}

Achievements

Maathai's achievements include being the founder and coordinator of the Green Belt Movement from 1977 to 2002.^{xii} She was the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002. Maathai pushed for equitable, ecological, grassroots led solutions that empowered rural women and communities that still have impactful, long-lasting effects today.

Essential Questions

1. Maathai received resistance from the work she did, yet she persisted. With her determination, the environmental quality has improved in Kenya.
 - a. What obstacles did Maathai face and how did she overcome them?

2. Maathai understood how the environmental problems in Kenya are all connected with other social issues like poverty.
 - a. What issues in America do you think are interconnected?

3. ***"You cannot protect the environment unless you empower people, you inform them, and you help them understand that these resources are their own, that they must protect them."***
 - a. What environmental issues do you care about and what information is vital to know to protect the environment?

ⁱ Wangari Maathai Foundation. "Wangari Maathai | The Story | About Wangari Maathai," April 30, 2020. <https://wangerimaathai.org/wangaris-story/>.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Says, Mothers Day Quotes from Son. "Words to Live By – A Tribute to Wangari Maathai." Project Learning Tree (blog). Accessed October 4, 2021. <https://www.plt.org/educator-tips/words-to-live-by-tribute-wangari-maathai/>.

^{iv} Ibid

^v Wangari Maathai Foundation. "Wangari Maathai | The Story | About Wangari Maathai," April 30, 2020. <https://wangerimaathai.org/wangaris-story/>.

^{vi} African Feminist Forum. "Wangari Muta Maathai » African Feminist Forum," March 14, 2016. <http://www.africanfeministforum.com/wangari-muta-maathai-kenya/>.

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} Ibid

^{ix} Wangari Maathai Foundation. "Wangari Maathai | The Story | About Wangari Maathai," April 30, 2020. <https://wangerimaathai.org/wangaris-story/>.

^x Wangari Maathai Foundation. "Wangari Maathai | The Story | About Wangari Maathai," April 30, 2020. <https://wangerimaathai.org/wangaris-story/>.

^{xi} Ibid

^{xii} "Biography | The Green Belt Movement." Accessed October 4, 2021. <https://www.greenbeltmovement.org/wangari-maathai/biography>.