

Wangari Maathai: Planting Seeds of Hope

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, February 2, 2005

“The woman is planting a tree in the world, on her knees, like someone in prayer...” Those words by Norwegian poet Halldis Moren Vesaas were quoted in Oslo last December, as the Nobel Peace Prize was presented to Kenya’s Wangari Maathai. Sharing a table with the laureate last week in Nairobi, I noticed how when she laughs, her eyes disappear into her midnight black face. “Plastic!” she said, pointing to the water bottle on our table on the veranda of the colonial Norfolk Hotel. “These bottles are a curse. They are filling our dumps, and they’re not biodegradable. We need to ban them.”

Maathai may have enough popular clout to pull it off. Since winning the prize, her portrait has suddenly appeared on posters along Nairobi’s crowded streets. Her name has long been known regionally; she won the United Nations’ Africa Prize for Leadership in 1991. But now her fame is global. When she walked into the hotel restaurant, international guests flocked around her, asking if she might, please, pose for a picture.

What a change of fortune for this outspoken environmentalist. On Earth Day in 1977, Maathai founded Kenya’s Green Belt Movement, encouraging farmers to plant trees in order to produce firewood and lumber, but also to stop soil erosion and provide shade. To date, Kenyan villagers have planted more than 30 million trees. Over the past three decades, the work has given jobs to almost 10,000 women who plant and sell seeds. Maathai’s work has transformed both the landscape and the people’s attitudes toward the environment.

This isn’t just an African version of America’s John Muir founding the Sierra Club. Maathai’s journey to success has been hazardous. During his fourteen year regime, Kenyan strongman Daniel arap Moi demonstrated little regard for the environment, democracy, or human rights—three spheres Maathai insists are inextricably linked. An outspoken advocate for conservation, Maathai has attempted to push back the tide of deforestation, a plague in developing countries throughout the world.

Her activism made her an enemy of the state throughout the 1980s and 1990s. She was a vocal opponent of Moi’s self-aggrandizing plan to build a 62-story skyscraper—the tallest on the African continent—in Nairobi’s Uhuru Park, one of the few green spots remaining in the overcrowded city. Her

environmental and human rights leadership spurred violence and ridicule. Moi and his cronies vilified Maathai as subversive, man-hating, and overeducated (she was the first woman in East or Central Africa to earn a Ph.D.). Moi led a relentless campaign of harassment against her. His regime publicly labeled her a “mad woman,” and she endured death threats, teargas, and more than a dozen arrests. Their standoff came to a head in 1992, when she and other activists led a protest in the park calling for the release of political prisoners. Maathai staged a hunger strike, was beaten unconscious, and was imprisoned.

The past few years have marked quite a turnaround for Wangari Maathai. In 2002, she was elected to the Kenyan parliament with 98% of the vote. In the same election, Moi was finally forced to relinquish power. The next year, newly elected President Mwai Kibaki appointed Maathai Assistant Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife. She now calls herself “an activist in office.”

Like many places in the world, the environmental challenges of Eastern Africa are enormous. They’re also dangerous. Fights over grazing land turn deadly. Women’s days are consumed with searching for potable water. Children are blown up by landmines, and their mothers are raped as they leave their villages to forage for firewood. By choosing Maathai, the Nobel committee made a statement about the real meaning of security, which is much more than bombs and bullets. As she accepted the prize, Maathai pledged to continue her fight not only for sustainable development, but also for cultural diversity and democratic governance.

That’s a heavy burden, I thought, as I listened to my friend. But she was all smiles and dressed in a cheerful African print, with ostriches grazing placidly on a field of bright blue. A matching strip of fabric was tied around her head, with bold six-inch ends sticking straight up from her forehead. “I hear that people say, ‘The prize hasn’t changed her. She still dresses just like a poor woman.’” She laughs her indomitable laugh. But behind her laugh is wisdom. She understands that popular support will be essential to realizing her dreams. “I can say what I think, because I’m only the deputy minister,” she jokes.