



With breaking stories and
newswire products from

UN NEWS CENTRE



UN pays tribute to late environmentalist and Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai



Wangari Maathai

26 September 2011 –

The United Nations today paid tribute to Professor Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and one of Africa’s foremost environmental campaigners, who died on Sunday.

“Her passing is a loss for the people of Kenya and the world,” [Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon said in a [statement](#), adding that Ms. Maathai was known throughout the development and human rights community not just for her “inspirational eloquence, but for her human warmth.”

Mr. Ban called her a “globally recognized champion for human rights and women’s empowerment” and a “pioneer in articulating the links between human rights, poverty, environmental protection and security.”

Ms. Maathai, 71, was the founder of the Green Belt Movement that encouraged women in rural Kenya to plant trees to improve their livelihoods through better access to clean water, firewood for cooking and other resources.

Since then, the movement has planted an estimated 45 million trees in Africa and assisted nearly 900,000 women to establish tree nurseries and plant trees to reverse the effects of deforestation.

“She was a visionary who saw over the tree canopy, but never lost sight of the roots,” said Jan McAlpine, Director of the Secretariat of the [UN Forum on Forests](#), adding that Ms. Maathai was a great woman and a wonderful leader who made a difference both in Kenya and around the world, one tree at a time.

Ms. Maathai was also a patron of the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)) and the inspiration behind the agency’s Billion Tree Campaign that encourages people across the world to plant trees for the benefit of their communities.

“Wangari Maathai was a force of nature,” UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner said in a [news release](#). “While others deployed their power and life force to damage, degrade and extract short term profit from the environment, she used hers to stand in their way, mobilize communities and to argue for conservation and sustainable development over destruction.

“She was, like the acacias and the Prunus Africana trees Wangari fought so nobly and assiduously to conserve, strong in character and able to survive sometimes the harshest of conditions,” he added.

Ms. Maathai was recognized for her life-long commitment to environmental sustainability and the empowerment of women with the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, the first African woman and first environmentalist to receive the prestigious honour.

More recently, she served as a UN Messenger of Peace as well as a member of the MDG Advocacy Group, which Mr. Ban set up last year to advance progress on the Millennium Development Goals – the globally agreed targets for slashing hunger, poverty, disease and lack of access to education, all by 2015.

Born near Nyeri in Kenya’s Central Highlands in 1940, Ms. Maathai received her education in Kenya and the United States. She was the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate degree, obtaining it from the University of Nairobi in 1971. She was elected to Kenya’s Parliament in 2002 and appointed assistant minister for environment and natural resources.

News Tracker: past stories on this issue

[Green campaigner Wangari Maathai to become UN Messenger of Peace](#)

