



# Taking Root

By  
Lisa Merton and Alan Dater

How does the simple act of planting trees lead to winning the Nobel Peace Prize? Ask Wangari Maathai of Kenya. In 1977, she suggested rural women plant trees to address problems stemming from a degraded environment. Under her leadership, their tree-planting grew into a nationwide movement to safeguard the environment, defend human rights and promote democracy. And brought Maathai the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.



## FROM THE FILMMAKERS

We first met Wangari Maathai in the spring of 2002 at the Yale School of Forestry. We were at once captivated and inspired by Wangari. We grasped immediately that her vision for change and her methods for change were at one and the same time interknit in a dynamic that showed its power and effectiveness in the doing rather than in political talking and ideology. She had the moral courage to speak truth to power and the patience, persistence and commitment to take action - against enormous odds.

In Wangari's story, we could see an evolutionary path that linked seemingly disparate realms. As her story unfolded, it became clear that each step she had taken could not have been taken without the ones before. Her path was a blueprint of her developing understanding, and hence, our understanding, of the nature of holistic change and the inextricable linkages between a healthy environment and healthy communities, good governance and peace. We were compelled to tell her story. It was timely.

Wangari was a cinematographer's dream. She was charismatic, humorous, a consummate storyteller. At the time of the first interview, Kenya was still under the administration of Daniel arap Moi, a man who had attacked Wangari personally, put her life at risk, and was in the process of destroying their country. Yet she held no bitterness toward this man, no hatred was expressed. Despite her amazing courage, she was humble. She had a delight in life and a positive outlook that filled her with a luminous presence.

It was not only what Wangari had accomplished that was stunning, it was also the way she had done it. She had had a way of choosing the right issue at the right time and not letting anything or anybody get in her way. Her story was organic; her rural roots connected her deeply to the earth, and despite her education and years in academia, she had never lost that connection.

When she left 15 years in academia, she reconnected with the rural women with whom she had grown up. In looking at their problems stemming from a degraded environment, Wangari was starting at the grassroots. These women were the caretakers of their families, and it was because their lives had become so difficult that she took notice. It made her problems in academia seem trivial by comparison.

One element of Wangari's and the Green Belt Movement's work that we really wanted to underscore in the film is the brilliant way they connected people's fear with their inability to act, and the cycle of fear that living under an oppressive government engenders. In working with the rural women, Wangari recognized that not only had the land suffered under the oppression of colonialism and neo-colonialism, but the women themselves and civil society as a whole had also been a casualty. The way people survive on the land they live on is an integral part of how their culture is shaped over time and when that balance is upset, the results are devastating. The loss of land, the loss of culture, and the fear had rendered people immobile. In doing nothing, they felt less and less worthy; they had lost their dignity, their sense of self

worth and therefore any sense of the common good. For us, this was palpable in the Civic and Environmental Education Seminar that was so brilliantly facilitated by Green Belt Movement staff.

When people arrived at the seminar, they were timid. Their bodies showed that they were fearful. At the end of the first day, they were already changed; someone was listening to them. They discovered that they held the answers to their own problems. A transformation was taking place before our eyes.

We realized, more deeply than ever before, in learning about the history of colonialism and subsequent oppressive regimes in Kenya, that the mechanism of oppression, whether it is on a global, community, or familial level, is utterly destructive of peoples' dignity and their connection to themselves and to their environment. By taking action to improve their degraded environment, the women and men of the Green Belt Movement are empowering themselves to protect their lands, to take back their voices, and improve their circumstances. Thus, they are changing the mechanism of oppression and passing on a different story to their children. This story has further instilled in us a sense of awareness and passion to critically dissect oppressive structures and fight for a more just world.

It is our hope that TAKING ROOT engages, inspires and moves you to take actions that further environmental, social and economic justice, for they are inextricably linked.

– Lisa Merton and Alan Dater, Co-Directors, TAKING ROOT



## THE FILM

TAKING ROOT tells the story of Wangari Muta Maathai, a remarkable and inspiring woman whose efforts to help the women of Kenya have had far-reaching environmental, social and political effects. Maathai received the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for her contributions to sustainable development, democracy, and peace, including founding the Green Belt Movement in Kenya. The Green Belt Movement is a visionary grassroots organization that gives meaning and structure to the lives of thousands of Kenyan women and their families by training them to plant and nurture trees as a means toward improving their environment and their livelihoods. Founded in 1977, the Green Belt Movement has not only helped to replant deforested land and damaged environments in Kenya, but it has also led to the social and political empowerment of women and men throughout the country.

Historic footage of British colonial rulers and settlers and interviews with present-day activists provide the context for understanding Kenya's environmental conditions. As colonists took up residence, they cleared land to plant cash crops, especially tea and coffee. The British regarded the native Kenyans as incapable of self-rule, and as the colonial power imposed a British-style government and way of life, the native culture of Kenya was largely destroyed. The Mau Mau liberation struggle of the early 1950s helped to pry loose the British hold on Kenya, which later gained its independence in 1963. The legacy of colonialism remained, however, reflected in the new government's policies that continued ecological destruction for short-term economic gain.

While doing field research in rural communities during the 1970s, Wangari Maathai learned that women were having difficulty finding nutritious food, firewood and clean drinking water. This information led her to focus attention on the country's environmental problems, particularly deforestation, to bring about a transformation of the land. Maathai's solution was a seemingly simple one: teach the women to plant trees to guarantee a future supply of wood for fuel, prevent soil erosion for food production, and preserve water catchment areas. As women gained confidence in their tree-planting skills and recognized the connections between the degraded environment and the problems they faced on a daily basis, they also became empowered socially and politically. Under Maathai's leadership and through the example of the Green Belt Movement, women and men organized and demonstrated joining forces with other pro-democracy groups

against the corruption and policies of the government of Daniel Arap Moi, which allowed destruction of Kenya's forests and park lands. During the nationwide efforts to change Kenya's government, Maathai organized a demonstration and hunger strike by mothers to protest for the freedom of their sons who were political prisoners of Moi's regime.

In spite of violent oppression and public condemnation by the Kenyan government, Maathai and her followers prevailed. The government released its political prisoners and in the 2002 elections, Moi was defeated after twenty-four years in power. Maathai's outspoken advocacy on behalf of the environment, human rights and democracy alongside her leadership in educating the people of Kenya about their rights and responsibilities as citizens, inspired and empowered thousands to successfully demand political change in Kenya. The film is a testament to the power of ordinary people to effect major social and political change. It shows how an extraordinary leader can light a spark: what began as a tree-planting movement became an example of how "the little grassroots people... can change this world."



## INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN TAKING ROOT

### Women of Kenya

Naomi Kabura Mukunu  
 Leah Kisomo  
 Lilian Wanjiru Njehu – *Kanyariri Mother's Union Tree Nursery*  
 Rebah Wasike – *Wanyekwa Maramu Women's Group*  
 Rose Wabuke – *Malaha Women's Group*  
 Ruth Wangari Thungu – *mother of a political prisoner*  
 Veronica Wambui Nduthu – *mother of a political prisoner*

### Green Belt Movement

Njogu Kahare – *staff*  
 Kinyanjui Kiungo – *staff*  
 Lilian Muchungi – *staff*  
 Frederick Njau – *staff*  
 Vertistine Mbaya – *board member*

### Activists

Kamoji Wachira – *environmental activist*  
 Kang'ethe Mungai – *human rights activist*  
 Ngorongo Makanga – *human rights activist*

### Others

Moses Ndiritu Muta – *Wangari's brother*  
 Njehu Gatabaki – *journalist arrested multiple times*  
 Rev. Peter Njenga – *provost of All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi*  
 Maj. Gen. Njuki Mwaniki – *Embakasi Garrison (Army of Kenya)*

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Biographical information on Wangari Muta Maathai

**Born:** April 1, 1940 in Ihithe village, Tetu Constituency, Nyeri District of Kenya

**Education:** Ihithe Primary School; St. Cecilia's Intermediary Primary School, Loreto Convent Secondary School in Limuru, Kenya; BS, Mount St. Scholastica College (now Benedictine College), Kansas, 1964; MS, University of Pittsburgh, 1966; PhD in veterinary medicine, University of Nairobi, 1971

**Personal:** Married Mwangi Mathai in 1969; divorced, late 1970s; three children

**Occupation:** Environmentalist & political activist

#### Career highlights:

1966-82 – Research Assistant and faculty positions in Veterinary Anatomy at University of Nairobi  
 1977 – Founded the Green Belt Movement  
 1981-87 – Served as a Chairperson of the National Council of Women of Kenya  
 1989 – Led a successful protest against construction in Nairobi's Uhuru Park  
 1997 – Ran unsuccessfully for president of Kenya  
 1998 – co-chair of the Jubilee 2000 Africa Campaign

2002 – Elected to parliament as a candidate of the National Rainbow Coalition

2003 – wrote *The Green Belt Movement Approach: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (Lantern Books)

2003-07 – Served as Assistant Minister in the Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife

2004 – Won the Nobel Peace Prize

2005 – Elected first Presiding Officer of the African Union's Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC)

2005 – launched the Mottainai campaign in Japan and Kenya

2006 – wrote *Unbowed: A Memoir* (Lantern Books)

2006 – co-founded the Nobel Women's Initiative with sister Nobel Laureates

2006 – launched the Billion Tree Campaign in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Prince Albert II of Monaco

2007 – co-chair of the Congo Basin Fund

### Portrait of Kenya

Kenya is named for the mountain that is a defining feature of the country's topography and the second highest peak in Africa. The country has been influenced throughout history by Arab traders, Portuguese explorers, and British colonizers. The official language of Kenya is English and the national language in Swahili. Most Kenyans grow up learning three languages: English, Swahili, and their tribal language. There are dozens of eclectic ethnic groups across Kenya and forty-two tribal languages.

Lying along the equator and below the Horn of Africa, Kenya is home to the Rift Valley, timeless coastal beaches, lush forests and prominent national parks. The wildlife reserves, including the Maasai Mara in Western Kenya, are home to the "big five" animals of Africa: lion, leopard, elephant, rhinoceros, and hippopotamus. These areas host the annual migrations of millions of animals, including the mighty wildebeest, as they move between seasonal feeding grounds and attract tourists from around the world.

Kenya is also known as the 'cradle of humankind' because of discoveries there of early hominids—prototypes of modern humans—in the Great Rift Valley by paleontologists Mary, Louis and Richard Leakey. Kenya's international reputation further extends into the world of athletics for producing world-renowned long-distance runners.

Following Kenya's independence from Britain in 1963, a decade of relative social and political stability pursued although ethnic, regional and class inequalities rapidly became evident. When the country's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, died in 1978, Daniel arap Moi took over peacefully. Moi and his government became increasingly authoritarian and repressive, resorting to political detentions, torture and killings to hold down pressure for political change. An astute politician, Moi exploited inter-ethnic divisions to help maintain his hold on power. When forced to accept multi-party elections in 1992, Moi's ethnic group claimed ownership of land and resources, attacking and expelling other communities. Violence again erupted following the 2007 elections when incumbent president Mwai



Kibaki was proclaimed winner over Raila Odinga, resulting in charges of voting fraud. After hundreds were killed, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and a group of African leaders helped the disputing parties negotiate a power-sharing arrangement and brought an end to the violence.

Alongside the conflict and in addition to its richness in history, natural resources and diversity, Kenya is now celebrating the election of the 44th President of the United States of America, Barack Hussein Obama, who is the son of a Kenyan man. Kenya also maintains good relations with her neighbors: Sudan and Ethiopia to the north, Uganda on the west, and Tanzania on the south.

### Forest Facts

In thinking about the importance of planting trees and preserving forests, consider the following:

- 70% of plants on Earth are trees.
- Tropical rainforests cover less than 6% of Earth's land surface, but they produce 40% of Earth's oxygen.
- It can be said that it "rains up" in the jungle, because so much moisture transpires from the leaves and evaporates into the atmosphere. This process of "evapotranspiration" affects rainfall not only adjacent regions but also latitudes far from the rainforest.
- Trees help to sequester carbon through photosynthesis, thus controlling levels of carbon dioxide in the air.
- The boreal (subarctic) forest is a nearly continuous belt of coniferous trees extending across North America and Eurasia. Canada's boreal forest is the largest intact forest in North America and the world's largest terrestrial carbon storehouse.
- Urban forests cool cities and reduce energy use, reduce storm water runoff, and improve air quality.

### Nonviolent Action

In their efforts to bring political change to Kenya, Wangari Maathai and her followers used nonviolence, a strategy that rejects the use of physical violence. Nonviolent techniques stand in contrast to armed struggle and have proven to be powerful tools in numerous movements for independence, government reform and human rights. As a strategy for change, nonviolence is commonly associated with "people power". It involves the active withdrawal of citizens' consent and cooperation with an incumbent regime. By removing their compliance—which is the source of political power—citizens undermine the power of rulers. Some examples of successful nonviolent campaigns are the struggle against British rule in India led by Mahatma Gandhi; the struggle for labor rights in Poland led by Lech Walesa and Solidarity; and the civil rights campaign in the U.S. led by Martin Luther King, Jr.

### Tactics

Weapons of nonviolence, some of which were part of the Green Belt Movement's arsenal, include:

- *acts of protest*, such as speeches, public meetings, marches and street theater, which bring public attention to an issue;
- *noncooperation*, such as strikes, boycotts and civil disobedience, which are intended to halt or interfere with an industry, business or political system;
- *nonviolent intervention*, such as occupations, blockades and hunger strikes.

There are scores of nonviolent tactics in addition to those above. Among the keys to successful nonviolent action are strong leadership, focus on a single objective, and restraint of physical retaliation in the face of aggressive force. (See Resources for additional information.)



## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Think about a feature in the natural world that has special significance to you. How would you feel if it disappeared? What changes might result from its disappearance? What would you do if that natural feature were threatened?
2. What values do you associate with the natural world? Are these values necessarily at odds with modern commerce and development? Explain.
3. Do you think Kenya can recover from the cultural destruction caused by colonialism? Should people be encouraged to follow the traditions of their ancestors, even if they have to be re-taught those traditions? Why or why not?
4. Is it possible for traditional cultural practices to exist alongside modern commerce and industry? Is it important that they co-exist? Why or why not?
5. How can developing nations contribute to the well-being – social, ecological and cultural – of developed nations?
6. How can developed nations contribute to the well-being— social, ecological and economic—of developing nations? What can the average citizen do to promote sound, beneficial practices and policies toward other countries?
7. What parallels, if any, do you see between British colonial rule in Kenya and U.S. actions in Iraq and other parts of the world?
8. Wangari is a fighter for human rights and democracy. What kinds of weapons does she use?
9. Why were the mothers' gathering at Freedom Corner in Uhuru Park and their hunger strike effective methods for achieving their objective, that is, getting their sons released from prison? How does the effectiveness of such nonviolent methods compare with the use of violence to achieve one's goals?
10. What does the film's title refer to?
11. What lessons do you take from seeing this film? How can those lessons be imparted to young people?



## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1- The Green Belt Movement (GBM) offers opportunities for groups and individuals to participate in community tree planting activities through our "Plant for Kenya" program organized by the Green Belt Safaris. Visit [greenbeltmovement.org](http://greenbeltmovement.org) to learn more about how you can participate in the Green Belt Safaris.

2 – Join the Billion Tree Campaign and make a pledge to plant a tree. Register your tree on the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) web site: [www.unep.org/billiontreecampaign](http://www.unep.org/billiontreecampaign).

3 – Organize a community tree-planting activity. Work with your local nature center or agricultural extension service to ensure appropriate selection and care of the trees.

4 – Rainforest Action Network sponsors several initiatives aimed at protecting the world's forests. Visit their web site, <http://ran.org>, to become informed on issues such as tropical ecosystems, destructive logging, and responsible forest management, and find out how you can participate in one of RAN's initiatives.

5 – The Green Coalition has numerous volunteer opportunities for individuals with a strong interest in environmental and social issues. Visit [www.greencoalition.net](http://www.greencoalition.net) to learn how you can put your skills to work promoting an environmental cause.

6 – Environmental consciousness begins at home. Examine your own landscape and yard care practices. Plant trees and native plants appropriate to your region. Refrain from using chemical fertilizers that can run off into nearby waterways or leach into groundwater. Check the National Wildlife Federation's web site ([www.nwf.org/backyard](http://www.nwf.org/backyard)) for information on creating a backyard habitat.

7 – Is there a social or political issue you feel passionate about? Make your voice heard! Write to your elected representatives and to local newspapers and other media. Learn how to organize your community to mount a larger effort to work for change (see Resources).

For additional outreach ideas, visit [www.itvs.org](http://www.itvs.org), the web site of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the web site of your PBS station.

## RESOURCES

<http://greenbeltmovement.org> – The official web site of the Green Belt Movement contains information about the goals of the movement, information on its founder, and descriptions of the work it does in Kenya and internationally.

[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2004/maathai-bio.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2004/maathai-bio.html) – Nobel Peace Prize web site contains Wangari Maathai's biography, focusing on her professional life.

[www.answers.com/topic/wangari-maathai](http://www.answers.com/topic/wangari-maathai) – Contains biographical information on Wangari Maathai, including her personal history.

<http://ncwk.or.ke/index.html> – Web site of the National Council of Women of Kenya, a non-profit non-political organization formed as the Kenya chapter of the International Council of Women. NCWK advocates for the social and political rights of women.

[www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2963.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2963.htm) – This State Department site contains detailed information about Kenya.

[http://crawford.dk/africa/kenya\\_timeline.htm](http://crawford.dk/africa/kenya_timeline.htm) – A timeline of Kenya's history from prehistoric times to 2004, when Wangari Maathai received the Nobel Peace Prize.

[www.worldagroforestry.org/billiontreecampaign/home.asp](http://www.worldagroforestry.org/billiontreecampaign/home.asp) – Offers a practical guide to selecting and planting trees suitable for various regions and climates.

[www.fs.fed.us/ucf/treesforpeople.html](http://www.fs.fed.us/ucf/treesforpeople.html) – Trees for People, a US Forest Service web site, provides a comprehensive fact sheet about the benefits of urban forests.

[www.treesaregood.com/treeccare/tree\\_benefits.aspx](http://www.treesaregood.com/treeccare/tree_benefits.aspx) – Sponsored by the International Society of Arboriculture, which maintains chapters nationwide as well as internationally, this site describes social, environmental and economic benefits of trees and includes a comprehensive menu of tree care issues.

[www.panda.org/index.cfm](http://www.panda.org/index.cfm) – World Wildlife Fund web site contains a comprehensive section on forests, including information on types of forests and forest conservation efforts.

<http://actionnetwork.org> – Sponsored by Environmental Defense, this site lists numerous environmental campaigns that welcome the participation of citizens.

[www.commondreams.org/views05/0331-31.htm](http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0331-31.htm) – Common Dreams is a national non-profit citizens' organization working to bring progressive Americans together to promote progressive visions for America's future, using the Internet as a political organizing tool.

[www.marininstitute.org/action\\_packs/community\\_org.htm](http://www.marininstitute.org/action_packs/community_org.htm) – Although the focus is on alcohol-related issues, this site offers clear guidelines for community organizing that can be applied to any issue.



[www.vcn.bc.ca/citizenshandbook](http://www.vcn.bc.ca/citizenshandbook) – This handbook from the Vancouver Citizens' Committee provides a quick guide to community organizing. Local information is separated out making the guide useful to people living in other places.

[www.acorn.org](http://www.acorn.org) - ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) is the nation's largest grassroots community organization of low- and moderate-income people, with more than 1,200 neighborhood chapters in cities across the country. ACORN carries out its commitment to social and economic justice through direct action, negotiation, legislative advocacy and voter participation.

[www.aeinstein.org](http://www.aeinstein.org) – Web site of the Albert Einstein Institution, a non-profit organization advancing the study and use of strategic nonviolent action in conflicts throughout the world.

[www.peacemagazine.org/198.htm](http://www.peacemagazine.org/198.htm) – Web site listing of 198 methods of nonviolent action, from *The Methods of Nonviolent Action* by political scientist Gene Sharp.

[www.350.org](http://www.350.org) is an international grassroots campaign that aims to mobilize a global climate movement united by a common call to action. 350 represents the parts per million carbon dioxide concentration that leading scientists have now set as an upper threshold for a safe climate.

[www.1sky.org](http://www.1sky.org). 1Sky was created in 2007 to focus the power of millions of concerned Americans on a single goal: bold federal action by

2010 that can reverse global warming. By pivoting to a clean energy economy, we can relieve our dependence on foreign oil, unlock the potential of sustainable industry and usher in a new era of prosperity and green jobs.

[www.katahdin.org/action/root/root.html](http://www.katahdin.org/action/root/root.html) – Katahdin is working with Taking Root to make the film and resources available to community groups, schools and the general public through events, a national broadcast and grassroots initiatives.

[www.takingrootfilm.com](http://www.takingrootfilm.com) – The filmmakers' website for TAKING ROOT. Mini-grants are available for screening events, tree planting costs and other tree-positive initiatives. A downloadable 32-page Activity Guide can be found in the Take Action section of the website.

TAKING ROOT WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* IN APRIL 2009. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

TAKING ROOT was produced by Lisa Merton and Alan Dater. The Emmy Award winning series *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit [www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema).

