

INTERVIEW

Don't Get Mad, Get Elected!

A conversation with Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai

Jailed, harassed and vilified by the autocratic regime of former President Daniel arap Moi, Wangari Maathai is the founder of the Green Belt Movement (GBM) of Kenya, which has supported the planting by women of over 20 million trees in that country since 1977, while also advocating for better governance and human rights. In December 2002, Maathai was elected to Kenya's Parliament as a member of the Green Party in the country's first free election in decades. In January 2003, she was appointed Assistant Minister for Environment, Natural Resources, and Wildlife. She was recently named an 'Elder of the Burning Spear' for services to Kenya by President Mwai Kibaki.

Last November, Worldwatch staff researcher Danielle Nierenberg and senior fellow Mia MacDonald met with Maathai in Nairobi. Here are excerpts of their interview.

WW: What's it like, going from being a prominent government critic to being part of the government itself?

WM: People were very happy that I was elected. What they don't quite appreciate is that if you're not the minister, there are many things you can't do because you are now working under another person. I try to be persuasive, but [things are] not moving as fast as I would have liked.

One of the major challenges is that we inherited a system that had been riddled with corruption and looting of public resources.

WW: What does your being in government mean for environmental activists around the world?

WM: Many of the environmentalists with whom we started in the 1960s and 1970s did end up in government, and a number of them became ministers. Sometimes when I'm frustrated I remember José Lutzemberger in Brazil. He was minister for the environment [1990 to 1992] and we were all very excited about that. Then he felt so tied up that he resigned. Because many of us are driven by idealism rather than politics, we have to train ourselves to be patient.

I'm very excited, actually. Sometimes when I go into Parliament I reflect that to be in this house is a very big privilege. There are 222 of us [members of Parliament] in a country of 30 million people, and there are 16 or 17 women. I try to remind myself of the responsibility.

WW: What are the most important lessons from your work

with the Green Belt Movement that you can apply to your work in government?

WM: One of the most wonderful things we did was to [help] ordinary people become seedling producers—what we call 'foresters without diplomas'. Our main thing was to try to make people understand the linkage between good governance and conservation—how an environment that is well managed helps to sustain a good quality of life. That is what produced the tree planting campaign. We created a movement that was not only taking action to save the environment, but also was about the responsibility we have as citizens, to change the government.

I'm working with the Green Belt Movement to continue producing seedlings in the thousands. I'm waiting for the ministry to be able to say we can buy these seedlings. If we said we can buy these seedlings, we would get them in the *millions*. You'd put a lot of people to work in the rural areas. You'd be putting money into the hands of very poor people and they'd be working for it.

WW: What initiatives are you working on?

WM: I wanted to start a national tree-planting day, and I thought that Easter would be a wonderful time. It's a long weekend. Kenya is almost 85 percent Christian. People here are crazy about religion and Jesus and crucifixion, and to get the cross somebody has to go into the forest, cut a tree and chop it up. I thought there would be nothing better for the Christians to do than to plant a tree and bring back a life, the way Christ came back to life.

WW: What are the main challenges Kenya's environment faces?

WM: How to recover forest cover, save our wildlife, give ourselves adequate water, and curb pollution. Forest cover has been reduced very quickly, to about 1.7 percent [of the country's area]. The level recommended by the UN Environment Program is about 10 percent, at the very minimum. Two-thirds of our country is arid, semi-arid, and desert. We are an agricultural country and we are very vulnerable, with the Sahara Desert right here. We need to increase forest cover, and the only way you can do it is by involving the people.

WW: Is reforestation really possible, despite population and development pressures?



WM: It is doable. We have a high population pressure, but we tend to congregate in the one-third of our country where we have water and good soil and forested mountains. But two-thirds is out there and should be utilized more. I've been advocating forestation in those areas with exotic species of trees that grow fast, are commercially exploitable, and [until now] have been planted on the mountains. We should plant fewer of those exotic trees in the mountains, and more indigenous trees there, because we also want to protect the catchment areas and the diversity of plants and animals.

Exotic species can do very well in dry areas. But this is also something that will require some convincing, because for the last 80 years or so we have been planting exotic species for the timber industry, cutting indigenous forests to replace them with exotics. Slowly, they will see sense in taking plantations of exotic species to other areas.

WW: What about corruption and land grabbing, which was a focus of your work with GBM?

WM: We have sent all the foresters home, because so many were corrupt and were destroying the forest. They are being re-interviewed to see whom we shall keep and whom we shall let go.

Involving the public [in managing the forests] is very important, because the public has been persuaded to perceive the forest as being the property of the government—none of their business. These foresters were able to destroy forests while the public watched. The public didn't raise the alarm and it was left to a few organizations like ours. But the more people get involved, the more we can fight corruption at the local level.

The other area where we are fighting corruption is in the wildlife sector. Our biggest problem there is poaching, and we also have conflicts with wildlife. Wildlife needs vege-

tation, and animals are coming onto farms looking for food and then people complain. We are trying to go back to Parliament and have a law giving us the mandate to compensate [people who lose livestock or property, or are injured by wildlife]. On one side we compensate, [and] on the other side we are saying, 'You must rehabilitate the forest with indigenous vegetation so that we can give the animals their habitat and reduce that conflict.'

WW: Are you thinking being in government may not be for you?

WM: No, no, no, no, no. For me it is the next step and a very, very important step. I sit in Parliament sometimes and remind myself, 'You're really making laws here.' If a law is made then you actually have an opportunity to influence future generations.

WW: What's been the impact of your gender on your work?

WM: If a man had been endowed as I have been, he would probably have been able to accomplish much more because the opportunities would not be so controlled. But I also know that I've been lucky because I have gone through many stages in my life—some successful and some not. I think that many women, especially in Kenya, relate to my story because they can read something in it that reminds them of their own story.

WW: Do you see yourself as a role model for women in Kenya or even globally?

WM: A lot of women were very encouraged by the fact that I won an election. Maybe it would have been different if I had been [appointed]. They would probably have said, 'Oh, some man somewhere decided to give her a position. I represent an ordinary woman—it's very different from coming into a position because of your inheritance.'

Sometimes I've had difficult times, and I think having those and overcoming them for women is very important—[showing] that you don't have to be down and out. You can get back up. That's what a lot of women relate to. I also think that's what men relate to now, because they figure, well, the story stopped being the story of a woman who is belligerent or a woman who is resisting being put in a certain place.

WW: Do you see running for president one day?

WM: Well, that is far-fetched right now. What I'm interested in is to see that I can make an impact in the government. What the future brings, I really don't know. There are a lot of very vibrant young men and women coming up; by the end of the second term I'll probably be feeling I'm too tired.

WW: Do you think former Moi government officials are saying, "I can't believe that troublesome women got in there"?

WM: People who were in the Moi government are probably confused. They probably don't believe I can sit still and not be shouting at them. At the same time, I marvel at the fact that they are not in the government and we are.