

WANGARI MAATHAI



"My mother was illiterate," says Wangari Maathai. "But she was my greatest symbol of power, strength and inspiration."

The strength Wangari inherited has supported her through the years when she was beaten by police – once until she was unconscious – and jailed. And all because of her campaign to save Africa's environment by mobilising women to plant 30 million trees across the continent. Now, she has won the Nobel Peace Prize, but it was a controversial decision. "In a world torn apart by war," some asked, "what have trees got to do with peace?" Ole Danbolt Mjoes, chairman of the prize, explains: "We have added a new dimension to peace. Peace on earth depends on securing our environment."

Wangari, whose parents were farmers, is one of only 12 women to win the prize. Her previous work in veterinary research took her back to the Kenyan countryside where she'd grown up. "When it rained, our rivers became red with silt. But in my childhood, they were crystal clear. So it struck me – something serious is happening."

A firewood shortage also forced women to feed their children food that didn't need much cooking – such as white rice and bread – so they suffered malnutrition.

In Kenya, just 1.7 per cent of tree cover remains, mostly replaced by cash crops, such as tea and coffee. When trees disappear, so does soil, which leads to environmental catastrophe.

Wangari decided to turn the fight against deforestation into her life's work, starting the Green Belt Movement, which helped Africans plant tree seedlings. She protested against ex-president Daniel Arap Moi's plans to build Africa's tallest skyscraper in Nairobi's main park. He denounced Wangari as a "man woman", and it was under his regime that she was arrested. But the international community spoke out against her imprisonment and she was released.

Now part of the government in her role as deputy environment minister, Wangari vows to continue fighting for the environment. "There's a difference between going to jail when you're guilty and going for a cause," she says. "At times you think, 'Am I doing the right thing?' But when you come out of prison, you are energised."

("Marie Claire")