

Board of Trustees
American Society of Landscape Architects
636 Eye St., NW
Washington, DC 20001

Dear Friends,

It is an honor to nominate Wangari Muta Maathai, Kenya's Assistant Secretary of Environment, Wildlife, and Natural Resources and the 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate, to receive the ASLA Olmsted Medal.

Wangari Maathai Biography

Born in 1940 in Nyeri, Wangari Maathai was able to pursue higher education, a rarity for girls in rural areas of Kenya. In 1960, she won a Kennedy scholarship to study in America and earned her biology degree from Mount St. Scholastica College in Kansas and a master's degree at the University of Pittsburgh. Returning to Kenya in 1966, Professor Maathai worked in veterinary medicine research at the University of Nairobi and became the first woman in East Africa to earn a Ph.D. She worked her way up through the academic ranks, becoming head of the veterinary medicine faculty, a first for a woman at any department at that university.

When she returned to Kenya, Professor Maathai was shocked at the degradation of the forests and the farmland caused by deforestation. Heavy rains had washed away much of the topsoil, silt was clogging the rivers, and fertilizers were depriving the soil of nutrients. In Africa, as in many parts of the world, women are responsible for meals and collecting firewood. Increasing deforestation not only meant increasing desertification, but also that women have had to travel further and further afield in order to collect the firewood. This in turn led to women spending less time around the home, tending to crops, and looking after their children. Professor Maathai decided to solve the problem by planting trees.

Under the auspices of the National Council of Women of Kenya, she introduced the idea of planting trees through citizen foresters in 1976, and called this new organization the Green Belt Movement (GBM). A 1989 United Nations report noted that only 9 trees were being replanted in Africa for every 100 that were cut down, causing serious problems with deforestation: soil runoff, water pollution, difficulty finding firewood, lack of animal nutrition, and so on. In the intervening years, Professor Maathai's GBM has assisted women in planting more than 20 million trees on their farms and around schools and church compounds in Kenya and all over East Africa.

The program has been carried out primarily by women in the villages of Kenya, who through protecting their environment and through the paid employment for planting the trees are able to better care for their children and their children's future. By staying closer to home, earning income from sustainably harvesting the fruit and timber from trees, women not only can be more productive, they can provide stability in the home. They can also create time for education opportunities—whether for themselves or for their children.

This cycle of empowerment through conservation is serving as a model throughout the world, where women both individually and collectively are entrusted with money and material to invest it in ways that make a difference to their daily lives. Professor Maathai's Green Belt Movement is a

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great example of how one person can turn around the lives of thousands if not millions of others by empowering others to change their situation.

Professor Maathai's road to success was by no means easy. During the 1970s and 1980s, she was frequently the target of vilification from the government, as well as subject to outright attacks and imprisonment. She refused to compromise her belief that the people were best trusted to look after their natural resources, as opposed to the corrupt cronies of the government, who were given public land, which they then despoiled.

In January 2003, Wangari Maathai was elected by an overwhelming margin to Parliament, where she is the Assistant Secretary for Environment, Wildlife, and Natural Resources in the democratically elected Kibaki government. Even though she is now being protected by the very same soldiers who once arrested her, her voice on behalf of the environment is still strong and determined.

About the Green Belt Movement

The Green Belt Movement (GBM) is a grassroots non-governmental organization (NGO) that has worked in environmental conservation and community development in Kenya for over 25 years. While tree planting has always been the focal activity, GBM programs have expanded to include projects in indigenous tree planting, civic education, advocacy, food security, greenbelt eco-safaris, and "women and change." Through these projects, GBM has succeeded in promoting environmental consciousness, volunteerism, conservation of local biodiversity, self-empowerment, community development and accountability.

The mission of GBM continues to be to mobilize communities for self-determination, justice, equity, poverty reduction and environmental conservation, using trees as the entry point. GBM has been committed to and has achieved success in the following areas:

Community Mobilization and Reforestation

GBM today has over 600 community networks across Kenya that care for 6,000 tree nurseries. Over the years these networks, along with individuals, have participated in planting more than 30 million trees on private and public land, protected reserves, sites with cultural significance and in urban centers. This has resulted in the transformation of many landscapes and protection and restoration of habitats for local biodiversity. Kenyans' attitudes toward the environment have also been transformed: awareness of the impacts of ecological decline has increased along with public interest in defending the environment, including forests and public parks and open space.

Individual and Community Empowerment

GBM's civic and environmental education program is a ground-breaking initiative launched so that people can identify the sources of their problems, such as poor use and management of their environment and poor governance at local and national levels. Through citizen education training, discussions and experiential learning, participants deal with topics like governance, advocacy, environmental conservation and responsible citizenship. During the review process for Kenya's new constitution, GBM held civic and environmental education seminars and conducted tree-planting activities to support the process and encourage a peaceful transition.

Increased Environmental Awareness and Action

Throughout Kenya, water scarcity is a problem. GBM works with communities to conserve and harvest water more effectively through the construction of dams made of sand. The water harvested is used for household needs, food crops, and tree nurseries. A related program within GBM improves food security—the capacity for families to feed themselves—by promoting the planting of fruit trees and indigenous foods, including yams, cassava and arrowroot. At the household level, hunger has been reduced and nutrition improved, especially where cash crops (coffee, tea, flowers) consume most of farmers' lands.

Sharing Lessons and Approaches Internationally

This program has increased awareness of the need to protect and conserve local biodiversity through various efforts. GBM's Langata Learning Centre in Nairobi continues to offer environmental education through exchange programs that expose participating groups to community biodiversity issues through discussions with local leaders and excursions to selected areas around the country. Through its Pan-African Green Belt Network, GBM has trained representatives from 15 African countries. As a result, several tree-planting initiatives have been established in East and Central Africa. GBM has also shared its experiences with groups from outside Africa, including university students, through "Green Belt Safaris" that encompass cultural exchange, field-based activities and seminars.

Inspiring the General Public

Through its advocacy and civic education campaigns, GBM has been instrumental in bringing environmental issues to Kenyan policy-makers' attention and has enjoyed significant success—most notably, the protection from wanton destruction of Uhuru Park and Karura Forest, both in Nairobi. Because of GBM's work, the public now understands that the environment is the base upon which all other development rests. This awareness is empowering, and brings the environment closer to the people. Kenyans continue to request GBM's support, including legal advice, to secure public green spaces and other environmental rights.

Building Capacity: Health and Income Generation

Another aspect of GBM's capacity building program focuses on supporting income-generating activities, primarily for women, but also for men. GBM workshops build skills in areas like food security, food processing and marketing, bee keeping, and tree planting. Women's groups have also produced hundreds of thousands of seedlings, for which they are paid, that are being planted in Kenyan forests where forest cover has declined. Aberdare Forest in central Kenya is the first program site. Local GBM groups are working in partnership with government authorities, in many cases for the first time ever, to grow and plant indigenous trees. Through school-based seminars, GBM works to train youth in income generation, job skills and entrepreneurship.

Promoting Sustainable Development

GBM's constituency and the general public have benefited from an empowered community and the fact that natural resources have been protected due to the tree-planting and civic and environmental education programs. Poverty is a multidimensional problem, manifested in the lack of access to resources, information, opportunities, power and mobility. It is integrally related to economic, social, political and environmental realities. GBM's activities invest in Kenya's future by

enabling communities to understand the essential linkages between their basic needs and a healthy environment and to then support equitable and sustainable development.

In closing, I would like to share with you an inspiring quote from Professor Maathai:

It is evident that many wars are fought over resources, which are now becoming increasingly scarce. If we conserved our resources better, fighting over them would not then occur...so, protecting the global environment is directly related to securing peace...those of us who understand the complex concept of the environment have the burden to act. We must not tire, we must not give up, we must persist.

Thank you for your kind consideration of this nomination. I hope you agree that Professor Maathai is extremely deserving of the ASLA Olmsted Medal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Susan L.B. Jacobson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Susan L.B. Jacobson, FASLA
Immediate Past President