

Celebrating Prof. Wangari: Reflections on the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate

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The week began with the Assistant Minister of the Environment of Kenya poised to resign her post if more was not done to prevent converting the native forest in Abedares to plantations or pastures. Monday's *Daily Nation* quoted Wangari Maathai: "I'd rather not be in Parliament than allow people to destroy forests." That day she addressed 115 environmental law professors from 40 nations at the University of Nairobi, to open the IUCN Academy of Environmental Law's conference on sustainable land use. Departing from reading her government's message, she made a strong case for better forest protection, and stayed on to visit participants and hear other lectures. The next day, the Ndung'u Commission of Inquiry reported that 733,088 forested acres of public land had been illegally given to private interests under the prior government. By Thursday, Maathai had returned to her home in Nyere and sent word that she would resign her ministerial office to protest reversal of a ban on forest conversions.

As the week ended on Friday, the same person had received The Nobel Peace Prize. Nairobi, and all of Kenya, was electrified by the news. Kenya's President Mwai Kibaki sent a helicopter to fly her back to the capital. Her ministry upgraded her official car from a modest Toyota Corolla to a 4 wheel drive Mitsubishi Pajero, and promised renewed support for protecting the forests. Extensive news coverage and full page advertisements of congratulations appeared for the "great environmentalists."

Ironically, the nation was observing a holiday that former President Moi had established to celebrate his fame. It was Moi who called Prof. Wangari Maathai "That mad woman" and "a threat to the order and security of the country." In 1992, Moi's words incited thugs to assault and beat her, her supporters and the journalists that covered their demonstrations to protect forests. In 1999, Prof. Maathai had said that "With a leadership that is so corrupt, it is difficult to protect the environment. People tend to think forests are government property and the government takes advantage of their ignorance. We emphasize they are public goods for the common good, for now and for the future."

With an American college degree and a German doctorate, Wangari Maathai became the first professor to head a department in the University of Nairobi. Beginning in the 1970s, Prof. Wangari Maathai had built a social movement to protect forests and the environment, to empower women, and build democracy and respect for human rights. In 1986 She established the Green Belt Movement, planting 30 million trees across Africa and combating desertification. In 1989 she successfully opposed conversion of part of Nairobi's Uhuru Park to build what would have been the highest building in Africa, to house Moi's ruling Kanu party. She was vilified by opponents. Imputing their own values to her, politicians viewed her as a media hungry political climber. Many were so busy complaining about Wangari that they could not hear her message. They said a divorcee was unfit for public life. She replied: "I'm sick and tired of men who are so incompetent that every time they feel the heat because women are challenging them, they have to check their genitalia to reassure themselves. I'm not interested in that part of their

anatomy. The issues I'm dealing with require the utilization of what's above the neck. If you don't have anything there, leave me alone."

Becoming laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize did not quiet all negative views. Some in Kenya still resented a woman speaking out, and being recognized. In Norway, some said that the environment has naught to do with peace, and implied that the Nobel Peace Prize was being debased by being conferred on an environmentalist.

None of this carping fazed Prof. Wangari. Her enthusiasm for her hallmark causes had reached steady state year before, and carried her through the maelstrom that follows a Nobel Prize announcement. When Prof. Charles Okidi and I met with her on the Monday after the IUCN conference had concluded, her genuine concern was to hear how the event had ended and to lament that she was unable to stay for all the lectures. In a time unsure of its values, her own values are a beacon for others: "I just have something inside me that tells me that there is a problem and I have got to do something about it, I think that is what I would call the God in me. It must be this voice that is telling me to do something, and I am sure it the same voice that is speaking to everybody on this planet."