

January 2023



Dear Club Members,

This January marks 20 years since Wangari Maathai became Kenya's Deputy Minister of Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife. This might not sound like a particularly impressive governmental job, but it was recognition for a life spent fighting the effects of deforestation, and working for democracy. She was the first African woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.

Born in 1940 she was a beneficiary of the programme known as the Kennedy Airlifts. This system allowed promising East African students to travel to the USA and Canada and gain college and university qualifications. The programme started in 1959, but was wound up by 1963. The name came from a \$100,000 donation made by Joseph P Kennedy Jr Foundation in 1960, arranged by John K Kennedy. In total 800 students benefitted from the programme, many of whom went on to have leading roles within East African governments, and universities.

Maathai studied at Mount St Scholastica College in Kansa, majoring in Biology, with minors in Chemistry and German. She then gained her masters degree at the University of Pittsburgh. These qualifications led to her being offered a position as research assistant at University College Nairobi in 1966. However, when she returned to Kenya she discovered the role had been given to another person, she believed this was due to her being a woman and also due to tribal bias. She did find another job, working with Professor Reinhold Hofmann in the newly established Department of Veterinary Anatomy at the same university. Later that year he convinced her to travel to Germany to study for a doctorate. In spring 1969 she returned to Nairobi and became an assistant lecturer. That same year she married, and her husband campaigned for a seat in the Kenyan Parliament. Democracy in Kenya began to fall apart, President Kenyatta has led Kenya from colonial rule in to independence, in 1964 but by now he is removing opposition political opponents, and effectively ending multi-party democracy.

Maathai continued to work at the university, becoming the first East African woman to gain a PhD in 1971. She becomes the first woman in Nairobi to be appointed chair of a department and to become an associate professor. Her husband continues to be active politically, in 1974 he agains campaigns for a seat in parliament. This campaign led to Maathai creating the programme for which she is most famous. Rural unemployment was a rising issue in Kenya, along with soil depletion due to the defects of deforestation. Whilst her husband failed to be elected, she created Envirocare Ltd, a tree growing nursery and planting scheme. That scheme did fail, but led to the Green Belt Movement, where women in Kenya were paid a small stipend to search the forest for seeds from native trees, grow them in nurseries, and then plant them to create reforested areas. The scheme has eventually led to 51 million trees being planted.

In addition the Green Belt Movement carried out pro-democracy activities, helping people register for elections, and speaking out about constitutional reform, and calling for greater

freedom of expression. This in the face of increasing government pressure, groups of more than nine people are no longer allowed to meet without a licence. By 1992 her actions had brought her in to such conflict with the government and the President Daniel arap Moi that her name was a list of political activists to be assassinated. Maathai barricaded herself in her home, but was arrested. Due to political pressure from outside the country she was released, and went straight to a demonstration, where she was knocked unconscious by police. Throughout the nineties she continued to call the government to account, and carried on working with the Green Belt Movement to safeguard forests, campaigning to make sure they weren't given to government supporters to be destroyed.

In 2002 an umbrella National Rainbow Coalition finally unified opposition parties and defeated the ruling Kenyan African National Union, Maathai won her seat and was appointed to serve on the newly formed government. She lost her seat in 2007, and sadly died in 2011, aged 71.

In honour of the trees that Maathai used to transform her world your fibre is of course green. . .

"Maathai stood up courageously against the former oppressive regime in Kenya. Her unique forms of action have contributed to drawing attention to political oppression—nationally and internationally. She has served as inspiration for many in the fight for democratic rights and has especially encouraged women to better their situation."

—The Norwegian Nobel Committee

In later life she used the platform she gained from her Nobel Prize to press home her message that environmental activism and democracy were inseparable. The poorest in society are most effected by climate change, and the impact is even greater on women. She campaigned against palm oil plantations in Indonesia and Malaysia.

"The tree is just a symbol for what happens to the environment. The act of planting one is a symbol of revitalising the community. Tree-planting is only the entry point into the wider debate about the environment. Everyone should plant a tree."

Happy Spinning

Katie

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label

50% Merino

25% Baby Camel

25% Corriedale

Further Reading-

Wangari Maathai-

Unesco Women in African History- <https://en.unesco.org/womenin africa/wangari-maathai>

The Green Belt Movement- <https://www.greenbeltmovement.org/wangari-maathai>

Wangari Maathai Foundation- <https://wangarimaathai.org/>

Why her legacy is important- <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2021/07/30/celebrating-life-legacy-wangari-maathai-environment-activism-kenya/>

Obituary- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/26/wangari-maathai>

Speaking before her death about climate change and the environment-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQU7IOxGvo>

Delivering the 3rd Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture in 2005-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AmVSDk|4iYw>

Her autobiography-

<https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/201111.Unbowed>