

“A Force of Nature”:
Wangari Maathai Fights for
the Environment and the People

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Group Exhibit
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Process Paper

Our previous topics have rarely been women, so we began by researching female leaders in history. We particularly looked in past interests, such as social justice, but also explored new fields, including environmentalism and policy. After considering whether the person's actions fit the theme, interested us, and created an impact other than breaking gender barriers, we compiled a list of twelve women. While investigating each, Wangari Maathai's story in *Women Leaders Who Changed the World* caught our attention.

Following general research, we gained insight into Wangari Maathai's life through her book about environmental activism, *The Challenge For Africa*, and her memoir *Unbowed* from Gannon University's library. Further research was conducted through newspaper archives, biographies, and documentaries. The Green Belt Movement website, Kenyan *Daily Nation* archives, and research into Kenyan legislation proved equally useful. Additional research at the Edinboro University library enhanced our historical context. To organize our topic, we drafted concept diagrams on whiteboards and realized it was too broad. We isolated three sub-topics relating closest to the theme: Uhuru Park, the political prisoners protest, and Karura Forest. Afterwards, we worked through each area together, compiling information and creating content.

From our very first year, we have been in the exhibit category. Initially, the ability to create a unique visual display drew us in. This time, we dismantled last year's exhibit to re-use the tri-fold base. We divided historical context, several stands, and Maathai's impact, while bordering our content in yellow. Indeed, a palette of vibrant green, yellow, and purple reflects Maathai's style and environmentalism without becoming cliched. We also planted our own

‘green belt’ of Zamiodulcas at the base and wrapped burlap to create a background representing agriculture and saplings.

With dedication and bravery, Wangari Maathai’s actions exemplify *Taking A Stand* by defending against government corruption to increase Kenyans’ prosperity. She identified deforestation by the corrupt government as a root cause of decline in Kenya and established the Green Belt Movement to encourage women to plant trees. Associating fostering the environment with protecting it, her questioning of misgovernance made the environment a political issue in a one-party, dictatorial government. Drawing international attention to the government privatization and development of Uhuru Park, Maathai successfully defended the public space while facing police brutality, threats, and malicious press. Nevertheless, Maathai held to her beliefs and later protested with the mothers of political prisoners, known as the Release Political Prisoners Group. Despite police attacks, she continued her support until all 52 prisoners were freed. Additionally, Maathai challenged the government’s destruction of Karura Forest while facing critical injuries and police guards. Influencing the Forests Act of 2005 and the inclusion of environmental rights in the revised Constitution, she also increased Kenyans’ rural incomes through incentives for planting. Today, Kenya is a truly democratic, multi-party government, and over 51 million trees have been planted worldwide. The force of nature who became the first environmentalist Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Wangari Maathai established a legacy fostering peace and prosperity which continues to grow despite her passing.