**Expedition into the Heart of Forest and Watershed Management in Africa**

It was one of those rare moments so amazing you’re not sure if it’s real. I was in a small house in Kenya sitting up late with the late Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai, talking water. I had traveled from New Haven, Connecticut to Kenya, Africa on a Coda Fellowship with The Nature Conservancy. My task was to help Maathai’s organization, the [Green Belt Movement](http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/) (GBM), prioritize their tree-planting and community empowerment efforts and focus their re-plantings on the sites that would produce the greatest rewards — both for the region’s ecology and people’s livelihoods.

Over the past three decades, the GBM has planted 35 million trees throughout Kenya. Maathai was one of the first to recognize the connection between environmental destruction and growing poverty among Kenyans, and her solution was to enlist tens of thousands of women to plant trees throughout the country. She believed the trees would restore dignity, help stabilize degrading ecosystems, provide habitat for wildlife and become a resource — when harvested sustainably — for the women and their communities.

This was a woman who had been harassed, beaten and jailed for her work but continued on to be elected to parliament and later named assistant environment minister. Then came the honor of being the first environmentalist awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. “What,” I asked myself, “could I possibly teach her?

As it turned out, we had a lot to learn from each other. Over five weeks, I worked side by side with Maathai, her grown children and other GBM staff. We pored over conservation action plans, discussed how to measure results of their tree plantings and the social benefits for Kenyans and began a painstaking process of prioritizing projects. We discussed the high financial cost of restoration and the challenging political environment.

But on this night, it was I who came away feeling as if I had gained clarity of purpose. Maathai spoke to me about Kenya’s five mountains — Mt. Kenya, the Aberdare Range, Mau, Mt. Elgon and the Cherangani Hills — which are known as the country’s “water towers.” Much of the water that Kenyans rely on to survive trickles down from these mountains, which act as a giant green purifier. Kenyans have a greater understanding of this connection than perhaps in my home state of Connecticut, perhaps because of its very clear impact on their daily lives.

Forest cover in Kenya has decreased from 20 percent to 2.4 percent in less than 100 years, and the country’s remaining forests are increasingly threatened by demands for fuel wood, charcoal, building materials and land for cultivation. People are living through periods of drought in which they have no water on Tuesdays and Thursdays and no power on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays in the capital of Nairobi. Wangari herself warned that if more forests are not protected and restored, the country will only have a third of the water it currently has by 2012.

Over the last few years TNC and GBM have been working collaboratively to restore portions of Kenya’s Mau forest with 350,000 trees by engaging communities via native seed collection (20+ species), propagation in nurseries, planting back into the forest (1,000 trees per hectare), and longer-term stewardship of the growing forest.

One of the challenges of reforestation in Kenya rests with the needs of people to derive a livelihood from the forest – often to the detriment of the long-term viability of the supporting ecosystem. The reforestation site I have visited in the Mau had actually been completed grazed by nomadic herders that had moved from the plains into the forest in search of fodder. Understandably, their livestock choose the newly planted seedlings resulting in a temporary setback for the project but also a teachable moment for the communities and the grazers around sustainable forest practices.

The importance of this project for the future forests of Kenya resides in a larger context being advanced in Kenya by the Conservancy – watershed management. Historically, GBM reforestation efforts have been organized around the five water towers. Moving to a watershed management approach requires GBM to shift its thinking and focus its efforts on important sites within each watershed that will yield the greatest benefits for people and nature. As GBM’s Executive Director, Dr. Karanja Njoroge explained, “The goal is to transform the way GBM thinks about how it works, not to change the way it works.”

While groups like GBM have been incredibly success over the last 30-40 years planting 30+ plus million trees across the five water towers of Kenya, these efforts have rarely been considered from a large-scale conservation frame aside and separate from geopolitical boundaries. The Conservancy has introduced and is implementing watershed management with GBM to ensure that the locations for future planting of those precious seedlings will serve to optimize the conservation gains within high priority watersheds vs. townships or constituencies. Believe it or not this is a revolutionary development that will focus replanting efforts in areas along riparian corridors, within core forests, and between core forest blocks. These are standard science-based conservation approaches that are just now becoming the “gold standard” in Kenya thanks to the expertise of the Conservancy and enlightened partners such as Green Belt Movement.

And when I turn on the tap, I’ll picture a stream passing through a deep, cool forest and remember that human well-being everywhere is inextricably linked to nature’s well-being. I hope you’ll remember that too.