

still cannot see the link between healthy environments and healthy people and economies?”

“Part of the problem is that the underpinning science is very abstract and the majority of people don’t quite understand it,” Wangari explained. “What is needed is to have the science translated into a language that people can comprehend, so that we can create a movement of citizens who understand that the planet is under threat and who are willing to take action and put pressure on politicians to make the right long-term decisions.

“We also need to educate politicians and business leaders. President Obama is promoting a lot of excellent initiatives, and it was very encouraging to see the US

“I know for sure that trees are our best friends in the global effort to mitigate climate change.”

Secretary of Energy, Dr Steven Chu, at the recent Symposium on Climate Change convened by HRH The Prince of Wales. Dr Chu attended the conference from the beginning to the end and that is clearly a demonstration that, at long last, the US government is committed to addressing climate change.

“But once we understand the nature of the problems we face, then we need to do two things. Firstly, we must change our own lifestyles because unless we practise what we preach, no-one will listen to us. We have to ‘be the change we want to see in the world’. And secondly, we must put pressure on our governments to take action and to commit to supporting that change via policy and economic infrastructure.

“I think that, ultimately, it is the collective conscience of citizens that will eventually change the politicians’ minds. Politicians respond to public opinion and unless public opinion is informed, it cannot put pressure on politicians. So, education for politicians and the public alike is of the utmost importance. The more people who get to understand the science, the more people who get to commit, the more we create a critical mass or movement for change that puts

pressure on the government to commit politically but also financially.”

Wangari’s work to educate people about the link between our cultural values and the wider environment is backed up by an initiative called the Billion Tree Campaign, launched in Nairobi in 2006 in association with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). By the time Wangari went to the Climate Conference in Bali the following year, a billion trees had already been planted. Now, she tells me, more than three billion trees have been planted worldwide as part of this campaign.

“Achim Steiner, the Executive Director of UNEP, has just launched a Seven Billion Tree Campaign,” says Wangari. “That’s seven billion trees by the time we reach the Copenhagen Climate Conference in December this year, as a way of mobilising public opinion and raising awareness. But it’s also a way of saying that we can all help in the fight against climate change – by planting a tree. Everyone can do this, and every tree that is planted sequesters atmospheric carbon. It means that anybody – poor or rich, man or woman, educated or uneducated – anybody can plant a tree.


“I also encourage the protection of standing trees. We have not yet appreciated the true value of the tree: it stabilises the soil; it gives us shade; if it is a fruit tree it gives us fruit. The tree fixes carbon for us; gives us oxygen; regulates the composition of the air... Trees are a wonderful gift to humanity!

“Trees also have spiritual meaning. I come from a tradition where our ancestors prayed and made offerings to trees. My people were particularly respectful of the fig tree. To them it was a symbol of the power of god – a gift that god gives. And trees are a symbol of plenty. In most other traditions around the world, trees have always been symbols of plenty. In the Bible it’s a symbol of knowledge. So a tree is a wonderful gift.

“The Greenbelt Movement has been going for thirty years now, and as people can see the reality of improved environment and lifestyles thanks to trees and forests, there has been an upsurge in interest in this campaign – not only in Kenya but in many other parts of Africa and elsewhere in the world. In the beginning people thought we were a little bit crazy! But now people realise that there is wisdom in what

we are trying to do.

“It is because of the work of The Greenbelt Movement that I was able to speak with Gordon Brown recently about the plight of the second largest forest in the world, the Congo forest, which is approximately twice as big as France. Prime Minister Brown pledged fifty million pounds from the British government to help us in our multifaceted work to help protect this forest region, and he also talked to his colleague in Norway, who gave another fifty million pounds. My work with The Greenbelt Movement and the precedent we have set in reforesting and protecting forest habitats were fundamental to that agreement. We have now established a Congo Fund, based in Geneva, which will continue to negotiate strategies with the international community to value and protect this critical ecosystem. I know that if the politicians accept and include this and similar models of forest protection as part of the climate solutions at the Copenhagen conference, then we stand a real chance of mitigating climate change.”

Wangari’s ultimate message as she makes her way to the COP15 Copenhagen Climate Conference is that forests must be part of the solution, and a financial mechanism must be established so that it is no longer economically viable to cut forests down. She believes that the governments of forest nations must commit to monitoring to ensure that there is no misuse of the potential remuneration packages intended to reimburse the economies of countries that have agreed to keep trees in the ground, providing ecosystems services for all of humanity in perpetuity rather than destroying the forests for the short-term financial gain of a rich elite. But her message is also that trees are the givers of life, the teachers of wisdom, the gifts of god, and our greatest allies in the race to mitigate the effects of climate change. 

As this magazine goes to print, the Seven Billion Tree Campaign is well under way, with 6,459,878,455 trees pledged and 4,763,921,220 already planted. For more information visit www.unep.org/billiontreecampaign

Professor Wangari Maathai is Founder of The Greenbelt Movement and 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. www.greenbeltmovement.org