



## SEBASTIAN CHUWA

2002 Associate Laureate, Environment  
Tanzania, (1954-2014)

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### Out of the woods

A botanist by profession, Sebastian Chuwa, who died in April 2014, spearheaded planting and environmental education programmes for the reforestation of northern Tanzania, near Mount Kilimanjaro where he lived.

His patience and perseverance in instilling the desire in local people to protect their environment were manifest when, at the 2004 Kilimanjaro Environmental Day celebrations, the millionth tree in his project was planted. About 2,200 people joined in the festivities, with schoolchildren giving educational talks, reading poetry and singing songs about conserving the earth.

"This milestone marks an acceptance by the community that their efforts in replanting trees help not only to safeguard their environment and improve the mountain's role as a vital water catchment area, but also on a more personal level, it shows the realisation that their efforts are providing them with subsistence products and a means of living," Chuwa said two years after winning his award.

"The biggest problem we face is poverty — the poverty of my government and its people," he said. "Tanzania is one of the poorest countries in the world, with per capita income for 2004 estimated at US\$290. Yet our population is growing at the rate of three per cent per year. The pressures created by a poor and expanding population are overtaxing Tanzania's already fragile ecosystem where 90 per cent of the people survive through subsistence farming. This leads to excessive clearing of land, as well as the indiscriminate use of pesticides and chemicals. The resulting lack of trees and ground cover leads to a cycle of ever-increasing deterioration of soil quality. People's ability to support themselves is in peril."

### PROJECT GOAL

Plant trees as a development solution in Tanzania

Website: [blackwoodconservation.org](http://blackwoodconservation.org)

Location: Tanzania



is not a new concept, but it is one that is gaining ever more recognition. When Kenya's Wangari Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, it was an acknowledgement of how a protected environment leads to greater economic and social stability, which in turn enhances prospects for peace. Popularly known as the "Tree Woman", she has inspired the planting of millions of trees across Africa to slow deforestation. Another Rolex Laureate, Swiss ornithologist Anita Studer, has also highlighted the link between poverty and deforestation, recognising that the destitution of the street children in Brazil is an almost direct consequence of deforestation. In 2002, Studer planted her millionth sapling under her plan to restore Brazil's Pedra Talhada forest.

Chuwa achieved success in replanting largely by using Tanzania's national tree, the African blackwood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*) as a flagship species in the fight against deforestation. Usually referred to by its Swahili name, mpingo, this remarkable tree, once dotted the entire African dry savannah. Today it is estimated that less than three million mpingo trees remain, with most stands confined to Tanzania and Mozambique.

The mpingo has huge commercial, cultural and ecological importance. It has a dense, oily and finely textured wood, which is used by the Makonde carvers of southern Tanzania to create statues and other artefacts. Mpingo is one of the world's most valuable commercial timbers, selling for between US\$15,000 and US\$18,000 per cubic metre. The nitrogen fixing properties of its roots add nutrients to the generally deficient soil in the woodlands where it grows. It is a food source for wildlife such as elephant, giraffe and wildebeest. And it is also known as the "tree of music", with many professional musicians and instrument-makers believing there is no substitute for a woodwind instrument — such as a clarinet or oboe — made of mpingo.

#### **Branching out**

Yet Chuwa warned that over-harvesting of the wood and the destruction of its habitat mean it could soon become vulnerable to commercial and local extinction.

"The people of Tanzania want to plant mpingo after learning that it is good for their economic future," Chuwa explained. "In fact, it is now considered lucky if you plant a mpingo on your farm. Townspeople plant the seedlings for shade and windbreaks, while farmers inter-plant mpingo trees in their cropland and use them as living fences. My initial goal was to plant 20,000 mpingo trees a year. In 2004, not only did we plant our millionth tree, but I am very excited to say we also planted 30,000 mpingo trees during that year." A critical achievement, considering that in Tanzania alone an estimated 20,000 mpingo trees — each of which requires 70 to 100 years to reach maturity — are harvested annually for commercial purposes.

Chuwa's determination and passion for the mpingo also drew the attention of two Texan woodturners, James Harris and Bette Stockbauer, who create collectible wood art from many species, including mpingo. Together, they founded the African Blackwood Conservation Project (ABCP) in 1996 to support his work.

Stockbauer explains: "ABCP is about helping people to empower themselves. The ABCP is solely involved with Sebastian's work, helping the people to uplift themselves by planting and protecting the mpingo and other trees in their area. All seedlings are grown from seeds collected in Tanzania. These trees can be used for food (producing fruit and nuts), medicine, firewood, building purposes as well as commercial timber — a source of monetary income in the future. ABCP also supports independent women's groups which have formed as a result of Sebastian's work."

#### **Forest under threat**

Chuwa worked in northern Tanzania, the region where most of the harvesting of mpingo trees

one of the poorest areas of the country, and illegal logging from that region, made possible by the bridge, has quickly become a major business. National attention was focused on illegal trafficking last year when the Tanzanian Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism issued an export ban, resulting in 143 containers loaded with logs being left stranded at the Dar es Salaam port.

"It pains me to see the environment of my own country being destroyed by forces which could have been, and can be, controlled by man himself," Chuwa said. "I realised that through education the situation can be alleviated. Environmental efforts will only succeed in my country if environmental education is targeted at a grassroots level — from primary schools onward."

Moreover, education is one of the many things that Chuwa did well. From 1992, he taught the youth of his community the need to conserve their environment. Chuwa set up 58 Malihai clubs, part of a national organization to facilitate sport and education in conservation. Malihai is a Swahili word meaning "living wealth".

Chuwa also inspired the founding of women's tree-planting groups. In addition to planting, these women build energy-efficient wood stoves to reduce the impact of gathering fuel. Chuwa also actively worked with Dr Jane Goodall's youth conservation foundation, Roots and Shoots. This is a grassroots programme that focuses on the human community, animals and the environment. Chuwa was the Northern Zone Kilimanjaro coordinator for Roots and Shoots, and established 36 clubs in three years.

#### **Natural vocation**

Chuwa's relationship with Goodall dated back many years — they became good friends since they were introduced in 1978 by renowned anthropologist Mary Leakey.

Funds from the Rolex Award also allowed Chuwa to purchase a truck. This proved to be a catalyst to the project's recent success, as ABCP's Stockbauer explains. "Believe it or not, at the start the project was carried out by postal mail between Sebastian and ourselves, with a four- to six-week lag between communications." The new truck has given him the means to travel to local towns with internet access and rapid communication.

Chuwa impressed everybody he met with his urgency to act without delay, and his boundless energy and enthusiasm for nature. And by listening to him, it is not difficult to see why: "Why did I choose to spend most of my time in the wilderness instead of pursuing a more conventional career, more relaxing and more enticing? I believe that to be a lover of nature, to commit oneself to conservation, you have to have a vocation for that."

Sebastian Chuwa clearly had that vocation.

*Alexa Schoof Marketos*

Updated in 2014

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