

# Forest heroes



L. Hrinivasan/UNEP/Topham

**T**hroughout history people have understood the vital importance of trees, and have been ready to die to defend them. Here are a few of the heroes of the forests.

## 1485

The **Bishnoi** sect is started by Guru Jambheshwar in Rajasthan, India. It forbids doing any harm to trees and animals.

## 1730

Bishnoi villager **Amrita Devi** hugs a tree to stop it being cut down by the local maharajah. She is killed, but 362 other villagers then sacrifice themselves in the same way, shaming the maharajah into forbidding felling in Bishnoi villages. Now they are oases of life in a desert.

## Early 1800s

John Chapman, better known as **Johnny Appleseed**, roams the United States frontier planting cider apple trees which he sells for a few pennies to arriving settlers, helping to establish an economy and improve life in the wilderness.

## 1922

**Richard St Barbe Baker** founds Watu wa Miti (Men of the Trees) with Kenya's Kikuyu people to carry out reforestation there after seeing the soil erosion caused by felling in Canada and North Africa. The organization, a forerunner of modern conservation groups, eventually became the International Tree Foundation, with branches in over 100 countries. More than 26 billion trees are thought to have been planted worldwide by organizations Baker founded or assisted.

## 1973

Villagers near the Mandal Forest in Uttar Pradesh, India, march to protest the felling of ash

trees by a sporting goods company. Inspired by the Bishnoi, they decide to hug the trees, stopping the loggers and starting a non-violent movement called '**Chipko**', after the Hindi word for 'embrace'. They knew that cutting down the forest would erode soil and cause devastating floods. Similar protests erupted throughout the state to frustrate the loggers, mainly led by local women who depend most on the fuelwood and fodder the trees provide. After years of such resistance, the Government banned commercial logging in Uttar Pradesh. Chipko movements now focus on reforestation.

## 1976

**Chico Mendes**, a rubber tapper in the Amazon rainforest, first joins *empates*, non-violent marches into logging sites, where demonstrators ask workers to stop clearing forest for cattle ranches. He later becomes a pioneering advocate of creating forest reserves to be managed by traditional communities sustainably harvesting its riches – like Brazil nuts and rubber. In 1987, he successfully convinced the Inter-American Development Bank to halt and renegotiate a road project threatening the forest and its people's livelihoods, and became one of the first recipients of UNEP's Global 500 award. The next year he was assassinated at the behest of a rancher whom he was trying to prevent from logging a reserve.

## 1976

Sporting hero **Alexander Peal**, the former goalie of Liberia's national football team, starts fighting to protect West Africa's last remaining sizeable tract of rainforest, succeeding in establishing a national park seven years later. He had to flee for his life in 1989 when civil war broke out and gave rise to a brutal regime, but he continued to fight

## Get involved!

Every year, thousands of community and student volunteers participate in **Australia's National Tree Day** by planting native trees and shrubs: more than 10 million trees in the last decade.

Since 2000, **Cultiva**, a non-profit group, has helped local students plant trees on the badly eroded Andean foothills around Santiago, Chile.

The **Government of Newfoundland and Labrador** has begun a pilot programme to offer secondary

for the forest in exile and returned to continue his work as soon as peace broke out.

## 1977

University professor **Wangari Maathai**, seeing the destruction caused by deforestation and desertification in her country, forms the **Green Belt Movement** after planting a nursery of trees in her back garden. She also begins campaigning to preserve African forests. Despite repeated persecution, she and the movement have so far enabled poor women in Kenya and all over East Africa to plant over 20 million trees, both combating soil erosion and creating a sustainable source of fuelwood, fruit and timber. The movement has spread internationally and, in 2004, Maathai was the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

## 1994

After fires destroy forests around their home village, **Monir Bu Ghanem** and four young friends from Ramlieh village in Lebanon dedicate themselves to preventing and fighting fires, planting trees and protecting forests. This group has grown into a national youth action organization, the **Association for Forest Development and Conservation**, which also promotes old-growth forest conservation, eco-tourism and environmental education – and in 2006 provided shelter for refugees fleeing the conflict between Israel and Hizbollah.

## 1997

**Julia Butterfly Hill** climbs a 600-year-old, 55-metre-tall coast redwood tree, staying in it for two years in a vigil that would ultimately save the tree and a small area of old-growth forest around it from commercial logging, bringing the plight of the forest to national attention.

## 1997

In her first year of practice as a lawyer, **Anne Kajir** succeeds in forcing logging companies to pay damages to indigenous peoples in Papua New Guinea. She has continued to fight for the forests ever since – despite being physically attacked more than once – exposing widespread corruption which is allowing illegal logging to destroy the last remaining intact block of tropical rainforest in the Asia-Pacific region.

## 1998

**Rodolfo Montiel Flores**, a subsistence farmer in Mexico's Guerrero State, founds a peasants' movement to try to stop logging from devastating the area. In the following year, he and a colleague were arrested, imprisoned and extensively tortured. In 2000 he won a Goldman Award\*, sparking an international campaign to have the two men released. They finally gained their freedom in 2001.

## 1999

**Fatima Jibrell** leads a march to stop acacia trees being felled and turned into charcoal for export from Somalia, then an anarchic country ruled by warlords. Despite repeated threats, she succeeded in persuading the Government of the Somali region of Puntland to ban the exports. Today, she and her colleagues promote solar cookers to eliminate the domestic use of charcoal.

## 2004

**Tree sitters** climb into platforms in *Eucalyptus regnans* trees 65 metres off the ground to protect Tasmania's old-growth Styx forest from being logged. Five months later, the Tasmanian Government promised to protect 18,700 hectares of trees.

\* Wangari Maathai, Alexander Peal, Fatima Jibrell, and Anne Kajir have also won Goldman Awards.

school graduates summer jobs planting some 900,000 trees.

The **All Pakistan Youth Federation**, coordinating 392 young peoples' organizations, sponsors tree-planting campaigns.

**Tree For All**, sponsored by the United Kingdom's Woodland Trust, has helped more than 350,000 young people plant 3 million trees.

**So what are you waiting for...**

[www.unep.org/billiontreecampaign](http://www.unep.org/billiontreecampaign)



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