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[PHOTO: WILBERFORCE OKWIRI/ STANDARD]

# WORKING TOWARDS A CLEAN WORLD



Professor Kiama Gitahi warns that human beings are rapidly destabilising the Earth's key life support systems; but he is determined to give his contribution to conserve the environment along the lines of Kenya's most famous environmentalist, the late Nobel Laureate Professor Wangari Maathai, **P 4-5**

# Protecting Mother Nature should be everyone's duty

BY JOY WANJA MURAYA

Rising temperatures and disappearance of some animal species are all signs the environment is having a tremendous effect on human survival.

As past and current studies show that humanity's daily actions threaten to destabilise the Earth's key life support systems, one man is determined to continue with the dream of Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai and do his little bit in bringing change by conserving what is left of our environment.

That man is professor Kiama Gitahi, a living example of the hummingbird that professor Maathai always talked about.

During a forest fire, while other bigger animals fled in fear, and despair, the hummingbird dropped water from its tiny beak on the inferno. Professor Maathai believed that there is always something each individual can do with their tiny beaks.

Professor Gitahi — who is the director of the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies based at the University of Nairobi — has the task of actualising the vision of the late Nobel Laureate.

Together with students at this virtual university department, he seeks to actualise to full potential, the intricate relationship between a conserved environment and man, thus advancing development, democracy and peace — the very reasons professor Maathai was celebrated and recognised for.

And as the planet's capacity to support the soaring human population is declining, professor Gitahi believes that every individual has his stake at making the earth a better place for current and future generations.

"Conflict with natural resources can hurt man but it is possible to benefit from the forest without destroying it," he says, while giving examples of conservancies like Ngorongoro in Tanzania where man and nature have co-existed with minimal depletion of the natural resources.

"Environmental conservation is not a one-discipline matter, but politicians, lawyers, doctors, teachers, bankers, students and both the young and old should take care of it," says professor Gitahi.

He describes the relationship as an intricate interaction between man and the animals, plants weather and water.

He observes that the earth is overwhelmed and is giving in to the exhaustion as seen in the surge of infections and emergence of viruses such as Ebola and Zika.

One of the greatest concerns of professor Gitahi is that half of Kenyans sleep in single rooms and wood is their main source of fuel for preparing meals.

Such a situation exposes them to respiratory diseases.

The number of rooms used for sleeping is an indication of the extent of crowding in households and the risk of contracting acute respiratory infections like tuberculosis and skin diseases. These particularly affect children and the elderly population.

According to the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 2015, the number of Kenyans living in single room establishments has increased in the last five years thereby increasing indoor pollution if the most preferred solid fuels is wood and charcoal in dwellings with poor ventilation.

He says that Kenyans should use clean fuel to ensure they live longer and healthier lives.

One of the projects of the Wangari Maathai Institute is phasing out the lantern, known as Koroboi, because it poses health risks on its users. It is very common in rural areas.

"We are supporting the use of clean energy known as 'wPOWER' that generates little or no pollution or emissions to its users," says professor Gitahi.

Scientists warn that the effects of secondhand smoke, especially on newborns, children and pregnant women is a risk factor to respiratory and ear infections and poor lung development. Further, it increases the chances of mothers delivering babies with low birth weight.

The KDHS 2015 also says that more Kenyans have access to water than electricity. Seven out of ten Kenyan households have access to an improved source of drinking water.

Improved water sources are defined as piped water in homes, a public tap, borehole, a protected well, rainwater or bottled water. Those living in urban areas more likely to have better water sources than their counterparts in the rural areas.

What drove a researcher with interests in structural biology, natural products and immunology into conservation science?

He met the late professor Maathai at the Department of Animal Anatomy where she was a



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chief guest and he expressed a desire to carry on her dream.

"Wangari Maathai wanted to give back to the university and the department where she had been the chair for many years," professor Gitahi narrates.

"She wanted to work with students and communities to protect the environment."

In 2010, professor Maathai became the distinguished chair of the institute. Within the year, she expressed concerns about her health, sought medical attention and began treatment immediately.

Unfortunately, she passed on in September the following year and professor Gitahi was indebted to continue with her vision.

"I got convert-

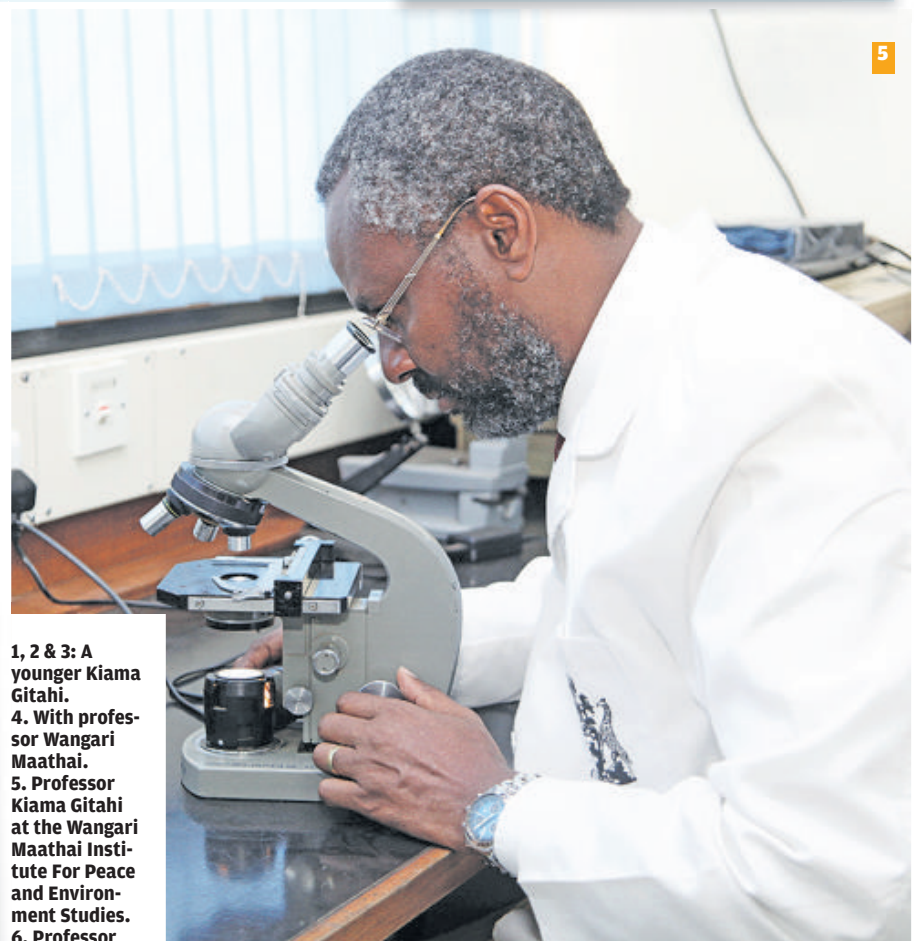
ed and I had to carry on with her dream, vision, mission to encourage trans-formational leadership that is grounded and focused on improving people's livelihoods and sharing cultures of peace," he says, and adds that "she wanted her experience in activism to be realised."

To actualise this vision, students at the Wangari Maathai Institute have annual home visits and live with the communities for a fortnight in order to understand their lifestyles and assist them in formulating solutions that enable cohesive man-Planet Earth interactions.

"We need to get more efficient technologies to provide more practical solutions for communities by actively involving the universities," professor Gitahi says.

What drives this 52-year old researcher?

He is quick to acknowledge the in-



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1, 2 & 3: A younger Kiama Gitahi.  
4. With professor Wangari Maathai.  
5. Professor Kiama Gitahi at the Wangari Maathai Institute For Peace and Environment Studies.  
6. Professor Gitahi shows women how to use the energy-saving jiko which does not harm the environment.  
[PHOTOS: WILBERFORCE OKWIRI/STANDARD & COURTESY]

fluence of his mother in Karima village in Othaya, Nyeri; professor Peter Gehr at the Institute of Anatomy at the University of Bern in Switzerland and Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai.

"My mother taught me hard work, focus and faith in God as virtues that should guide my path daily," says professor Gitahi, who is the fifth child in a family of nine.

Walking on this thin path called life, he also quotes American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."

On his work, he says that after his

studies in Switzerland and even when positions to teach abroad were placed on the table, his desire to mentor young researchers not only brought him back, but also keeps him at home.

"I must go home. That is where I can work with the younger and motivated minds to address problems that affect our people," he says.

Professor Gitahi calls on African governments to invest in research, especially at the tertiary levels, to enable them arrive at homegrown solutions rather than relying fully on experts from beyond our borders.

"We have brilliant minds in Africa like elsewhere in the world, we should invest in them," he says.