

Basketball megastar **YAO MING**, one of the world's most famous athletes, with a fan base of millions, has been appointed UNEP's first-ever Environmental Champion. The five-time NBA All Star has played center for the Houston Rockets since 2002, and has played on the Chinese National Team since the age of 18. With a height of 2.29m (7'6"), he is among the tallest in the NBA. At the Beijing Olympic Games, Yao Ming carried the Olympic Torch into Tiananmen Square and was his country's flag-bearer at the Opening Ceremony. But it is not just Yao Ming's athletic skills and iconic status in China that stand out. He has always been outspoken on the causes he cares about



strongly: from disadvantaged youths to HIV/AIDS. In 2006 he pledged to give up eating shark's fin soup — a popular dish in China — as part of a campaign to protect endangered sharks. In his role as UNEP's first environmental champion he will work with governments, the private sector and the public to promote the intelligent management of the environment. "As a sportsman, I believe sport has a major role to play in promoting environmental issues so I will work with young people across the world and try to inspire them to plant trees, use energy efficient light bulbs, harvest rain water and to become environmental champions in their own communities," Yao said when the news was announced.

In 2007, Amazon **CHIEF ALMIR SURUI** looked up his patch of Amazon rainforest on Google Earth and saw evidence of deforestation. He decided it was time to "put down the



bow and arrow and pick up the laptop" and asked Google to provide high-quality satellite imagery so the tribe could monitor illegal loggers on its 600,000-acre reserve and raise global awareness about the destruction of the Amazon. A partnership was born, and Google is now developing more precise satellite images of the area, and training the tribe on surfing the Web and using map data. Chief Surui's ambition is for his tribe to use computers with satellite Internet connections and high-resolution images from Google Earth to police all corners of their reservation. They can then prove to authorities that destruction is occurring and demand action, or deter loggers and miners because they will know they are being monitored. Last year, Google Earth also joined forces with UNEP to highlight before-and-after images of environmental destruction.

PENNY WONG's appointment as Australia's Minister for Climate Change and Water started with a bang when she accompanied Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to Bali for the international climate change talks in December 2007.



During that meeting, Rudd famously ratified the Kyoto Protocol. As the country's first-ever Minister for Climate Change, Ms Wong has the task of gearing her country to act on climate change. The issue is a crucial in Australia, now into the seventh year of its 'Big Dry'. So far, the ride has not been entirely smooth, with criticism from the opposition, industry and environmentalists as Mr. Rudd's government tries to balance cutting emissions and protecting Australia's competitiveness. But Ms Wong says the Federal Government remains committed to a 2010 start-up date for the proposed Australian Emissions Trading Scheme as the primary mechanism for achieving a long term emissions reduction goal.

Environmental organizations are known for their provocative campaigns, but not many of them feature world-famous actors. The latest television campaign by Conservation International casts **HARRISON FORD** in an uncomfortable role: he has his chest waxed on camera in order to make the point that



'Every bit of rainforest that gets ripped out over there really hurts us over here'. The move may seem surprising coming from the man best known for his whip-cracking antics as Indiana Jones and his starring roles in dozens of other popular films over his four-decade career. Yet Harrison Ford is also a staunch environmentalist who has been involved with Conservation International for more than 15 years and is now the Vice Chair of CI's Board of Directors. He has been widely recognized

for his environmental work — recent recognition includes the World Ecology Award from the International Center for Tropical Ecology and the Global Environmental Citizen Award from the Center for Health and Global Environment. He is also Honorary Chair of the Indianapolis Prize, an award for animal conservation. The actor has also donated 389 acres of his property in Wyoming for a conservation easement to the Jackson Hole Land Trust.

It is impossible to talk about forests without mentioning **WANGARI MAATHAI**, the Nobel Laureate who has propelled a worldwide



wave of tree planting over the last few years. In 1977, Prof. Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement, the grassroots environmental organization which has now planted more than 40 million trees across her native Kenya to prevent soil erosion. In 2004, Prof. Maathai became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for 'her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace'. Wangari Maathai was also the inspiration behind UNEP's Billion Tree Campaign, which met its target in November 2007 and now aims to plant seven billion trees by the 2009 climate change meeting in Copenhagen. Her latest role is as co-chair of the Congo Basin Forest Fund, an initiative launched in June 2008. The aim of the fund is to support innovative proposals to make the Congo Basin's forests worth more as a living resource than they would be cut down.