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Beiträge

Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier

**Address on the opening of the Alexander von Humboldt
Season in Quito, Ecuador, on 13 February 2019**



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Introductory remarks

Ottmar Ette

From 11 to 16 February 2019, the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, together with his wife and a delegation accompanying him, travelled to Latin America. The destinations of this trip were the two South American countries Colombia and Ecuador. The journey took the Federal President to Cartagena de Indias, the Caribbean archipelago of the Islas del Rosario and finally to Bogotá. From the capital of Colombia, the group travelled to the capital of Ecuador, to the Pacific Archipelago of the Galapagos Islands, to the famous volcanic giant Antisana and finally to Guayaquil and from there back to Germany.

The journey followed in the footsteps of Alexander von Humboldt and, on the Galapagos Islands, Charles Darwin. The homage to the Prussian scholar Humboldt was an important part of the delegation's visit. The actual highlight of the Federal President's stay in Latin America was his speech in Quito on 13 February 2019, with which he ceremoniously opened the "Humboldt Season" on the occasion of Alexander von Humboldt's 250th birthday. This fact is of considerable symbolic importance, as the opening did not take place in Berlin, but in a Latin American capital to which the younger of the two Humboldt brothers was particularly committed. We would like to thank the Federal President and the Office of the Federal President for their kind permission to reprint the text in its English and German versions below.

Address on the opening of the Alexander von Humboldt Season in Quito, Ecuador, on 13 February 2019

Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier

Over the course of my political life, I have been asked on countless occasions who my role models and heroes from history are. I am certain that one person has always featured in my responses, and that is Alexander von Humboldt. The other Prussian. The explorer. The proponent of the Enlightenment. The one who brought the world to Germany and who taught us all that we cannot be indifferent to this world.

I have often asked myself what it was that inspired this man. What makes an educated and wealthy young nobleman from the gentle plains of Brandenburg want to climb the Chimborazo? What made him stumble over jagged rocks and icy stone at 5000 m above sea level, suffering from altitude sickness, barely in possession of his faculties, and complete his measurements on the glacier nevertheless?

Doubtlessly it was his determination to conquer the world. Not in that well-known and fearsome manner, not armed with a shotgun or machete, but with a barometer, telescope, hair hygrometer and other measuring instruments. He came to observe and to survey, to discover and to understand. It was books, knowledge that was already available to the world, that he absorbed and which awakened his curiosity for that which had yet to be discovered or researched. And he read everything that he was able to get his hands on.

Books about botany, volcanism, geology—they were the door through which Alexander von Humboldt set out into a new world. You could also say that they were a door through which he made his escape, fleeing what he called “Schloss Langweil” (Castle of Boredom), his home city of Berlin and his family in order to get to know the New World and ultimately find also here in Ecuador a measure of what he spent his whole life restlessly in search of.

And this country, this continent, Latin America, rewarded him for this. He returned to Europe a rich man. Not rich in terms of money—on the contrary—but rich in impressions and insights. And he also enriched the region that he travelled through and the people whom he encountered. He drew strength from this trip right up until his dying day, and we continue to benefit to this day from what he saw, understood and passed on to others at that time.

It is a great honour for me to finally be a guest in your wonderful country myself today. My wife and I have looked forward to this visit for a long time as it is a visit to friends, to a country that is seeking its own path into the future of democracy, a country that has courageously embarked on this path and seeks equity and peace with its partners and neighbours. And this visit is taking place in a year in which we are remembering him and celebrating his 250th birthday together—here, in Ecuador, where so much of his legacy is to be found—the legacy of the discoverer, researcher and philosopher Alexander von Humboldt.

What he left behind in terms of insights, he left to all of us, to the world. And he is, if I may add, also a discovery himself, a miracle, a universal human being, an exceptional figure. His trips through Latin America, together with his French colleague Aimé Bonpland, opened his eyes to what he ultimately taught us, namely that humans are important in nature and shoulder

responsibility for nature. And that we as political beings can only coexist in a humane way if we do not aspire to rise above others or above nature. In Ecuador, this concept has long been enshrined in the country's cultural heritage. And also in politics. If you examine the Ecuadorian constitution today, then you will find the objective that is "sumak kawsay", the good life in harmony with nature—and read about the rights of nature and "Pachamama" or Mother Earth. Even the ever eloquent Humboldt could probably only have nodded and agreed with this.

So we are tracing Humboldt's footsteps on this, my first trip to South America as Federal President—From Cartagena, where his expedition went ashore once again in 1801, to Bogotá, which back then entailed a long and arduous overland trek, where he wanted to "compare his hay", as he wrote self-deprecatingly, with that of the great Botanist José Mutis.

And thence in the coming days to the Humboldt Current, named after its surveyor, which continues to be a source of sardines and to flow around the Galápagos Islands, to the Antisana volcano, and to Guayaquil, from whence Humboldt continued his journey to Mexico and where a German Humboldt school has stood for the past 60 years.

The places that Humboldt travelled to still make up an impressive route to this day. For travelers in Ecuador, or so I am told, the old adage is that there is no getting around Alexander von Humboldt, and that might be the case everywhere.

Humboldt himself drew lessons from and rejoiced in his time in Latin America into very old age—for almost 55 years. This was among the most intellectually productive periods of his life.

He was fascinated by everything he came across, and was as enthusiastic about the country's natural surroundings as he was about its people. His curiosity and the boundless joy he derived from engaging in discussion on the knowledge he had just acquired made no distinction between religion, class, origin or skin colour. A particularly famous Ecuadorian became Humboldt's companion here in Quito. Carlos de Montúfar accompanied him for a number of years—first to the Chimborazo, and ultimately to Paris, where they witnessed Napoleon's coronation as Emperor together.

South America looks back on a long tradition of researchers and scientists who have studied Alexander von Humboldt. They have had a decisive influence on the perception of Alexander von Humboldt, his perception as the "second discoverer of America", as the insatiable explorer and surveyor, as Simon Bolivar's friend. Of an Alexander von Humboldt, who with his descriptions of the breathtaking beauty and uniqueness of the region, with his—at least by the standards of his day—comparatively clear stance against slavery and against colonial rule, and with his respect for the cultures of the indigenous population, laid some of the intellectual groundwork for the struggle for freedom—and who many people here still consider to be the model of the "good European". I believe that this egalitarian and anti-colonial spirit has the capacity to be a beacon for our partnership, especially today, when the cultural legacy of the colonial period is increasingly in the spotlight in Europe.

Humboldt did not always have an easy time in Germany, however. Less than 12 years after his death, he, who had been an international superstar for decades after all, was largely banished from the national memory. His attitude was perceived by many to be too accommodating to the French and too cosmopolitan for the new German Reich of 1871, while his research was deemed to be too eclectic, popular and romantic. These were undesirable characteristics, and

Alexander von Humboldt did not fit into the picture. It was not until after 1945 that he was allowed to play a prominent role once again; in the former GDR, for instance, he was stylised as one of the intellectual forefathers of socialism. Meanwhile, in West Germany, the story was told for decades of the wild adventurer and natural scientist who was Humboldt, in contrast to his statesmanlike brother Wilhelm with his passion for cultural research—an exaggeration that did justice to neither man.

There are therefore many images of Humboldt. A number of our experts have told me that Alexander von Humboldt lived for so long, was active in so many different places, conducting research into so many different fields, that it is only possible to speak of him in the plural.

This notion seems to me to be more than apposite. At any rate, I am quite certain that we are not likely to run out of material to do with him anytime soon in this anniversary year. After all, all of these different perceptions of Alexander von Humboldt have one thing in common, namely that none is wrong, but none can claim to be complete. It is impossible to pin Alexander von Humboldt down in absolute terms. I firmly believe that if we want to get to know this person better, then we must take our own point of view into account—but also factor in the point of view of our interlocutors and take this seriously.

Perhaps this is the best way for us to do justice to Humboldt. He would have been opposed to refusing to listen to different opinions and views on equal terms. He considered us to be a unity, as a human race “equally destined for freedom”. He accepted differences between peoples, but he was against allowing certain tribes to think of themselves as “nobler” than others. He taught us to respect other cultures and traditions—an attitude that we should take to heart once again in the face of the daily onslaught against multilateralism and the coexistence of nations.

Humboldt is so multilayered and multifaceted that even the question as to which deeper base-lines and outlines emerge when these many different images of Humboldt are projected onto one another is complicated. Is it his humanity? His curiosity and his passion for conducting research? His joined-up thinking and his ceaseless correspondence? His boundlessness in the best sense of the word? His eternal surveying and incessant collecting? His restlessness? His multilingualism? His generosity and bounty? His sharp tongue or his pointed pen? Or his love of freedom?

I personally have been inspired by Humboldt for many years, in a great number of his facets. But what I find most impressive is his sheer capacity for enthusiasm: to marvel and admire, but above all to relate gripping tales about nature and people. Everything I have read about him resonates with this joy of discovery and of telling stories. Alexander von Humboldt was just as passionate about the smallest blade of grass as he was about the tallest volcano—and his talent for taking us with him remains undiminished to this day.

His life and his work are permeated by a profound affection for nature, for people and for all living beings in his midst. Humboldt accords a legitimate and important role in nature even to the infuriating mosquito, which made the travellers’ days spent in the jungle unbearable—and, even more than this, he wants to convince us about this too!

And he does not try to convince us with dry academic language, figures, statistics and tables, but rather with an emotional and aesthetic depiction of reality—for which he was subsequently unjustly disparaged, particularly in his native country of Germany. His delight, which

was sparked by his way of experiencing and seeing his surroundings with the senses, inspired his literary and eminently readable descriptions of the world. This made him a world-famous best-selling author and much sought-after interlocutor, even as a young man.

And moreover, he also made his research visually appealing through his countless drawings and illustrations. We are all familiar with his famous “Tableau physique”, which shows the great Chimborazo from the side in an image that combines beauty and erudition. Humboldt and Bonpland explained different vegetation zones, species of plants, geophysical measurements and geographical points of comparison all over the world, as well as many other natural phenomena above sea level, in a way that brought them to life for their readers.

In short, yes, Alexander von Humboldt was the first person to realise that everything on our planet is connected with everything else. “Everything is interaction,” he wrote. And that is why he is rightfully regarded today as the father of ecology. To quote Andrea Wulf, he is the “inventor of nature”. But what I find almost more important is that he wanted absolutely everyone to be able to understand this realisation. As Ottmar Ette wrote, Humboldt aimed to popularise and democratise science and to make it accessible to as many parts of the population as possible. In other words, he achieved two things—on the one hand, he was instrumental in shaping our contemporary concept of nature, while on the other, he was one of the greatest explainers of nature the world has ever known.

This urge to share his own delight in his environment with us, his readers and future generations, was not a mere end in itself for Humboldt. In a very far-sighted way, he observed people’s interventions in their environment and all the effects this had. At Lake Valencia in present-day Venezuela, for example, he saw how forest clearance by plantation owners led to soil erosion and lowered the water table—and even then he warned that human intervention in nature could change the climate.

His emotional approach to the world thus also had a protective and preserving element. It entailed a very simple realisation, namely that people only protect what they love. So if people are to protect the environment, first and foremost they must understand and come to love it! Here in Ecuador, you have a wonderful example of this simple realisation. The Galápagos archipelago is a unique treasure that your country preserves for humankind as a whole. It was on these islands that Charles Darwin took crucial steps towards understanding evolution. And Humboldt, who never visited Galápagos himself, praised Darwin’s travel journal, “The Voyage of the Beagle”, as “an excellent and admirable book”.

The Galápagos Islands are home to a unique biosphere with animal and plant species not found anywhere else in the world. More than almost anywhere else, one sees there how even the smallest intervention in nature can lead to great changes. That is why you already started protecting these islands in the 1960s, gradually switched the economy to non-invasive tourism and increased this protection significantly from 2007. [...]

At the same time, Galápagos is part of the world. When the climate changes, when the sea or air become polluted, or when people and animals migrate, this also has an impact on these islands. One example is that the issue of plastic waste is of acute importance on the islands, as it is in many other places in the world. [...]

Plastic has become ever more ubiquitous. From food packaging to mobile telephones, from toothbrushes to office chairs, from kitchen appliances to clothing—hardly any item or situation

in life does not involve plastic these days. Plastics are always used and even if they have made and continue to make our lives easier in many ways, too many of the costs incurred in their ever-increasing use often remain unpaid. If we continue on the same path as before, there may be more plastic than fish in the oceans by 2050. A plastic bag tossed carelessly into the harbour in Hamburg may be washed up on the beach in Galápagos a few months later. Microplastics from cosmetics enter the food chain directly or flow down rivers into the sea. Not only does all this plastic—in Galápagos alone, dozens of tonnes per year, from all over the world!—pollute nature and harm animals and plants, it can also carry invasive species as “stowaways”, with potentially irreparable consequences.

Europe and many governments around the world are finally focusing on the topic of plastic waste—this is late, but all the more necessary. The ban on single-use plastics or their compulsory recycling are steps in the right direction, even if plastic, I might add, is only *one* example of how Humboldt’s elementary finding that “everything is interaction” should be reflected in environmental policy.

The environment does not end at national borders—something that would have been perfectly obvious to Humboldt 200 years ago. And that is why environmental protection cannot end at national borders. The impact of environmental degradation, particularly climate change, can be felt all over the world.

And this impact threatens our existence. I mean the damage caused by extreme weather events, the impoverishment arising from droughts and the mass migration movements sparked by these disasters. And finally, I also mean a species extinction that affects, even threatens, the Earth’s entire ecosystem and thus our human existence.

It is clear to me that humankind’s future path cannot simply be a continuation of what we took the liberty of doing in the 20th century. We only have one planet. That is why we cannot continue as before. If we want our children to have a future in this world, we need to refine our rules, economic system and technologies and—above all—to change our own behaviour.

I imagine that this would have been apparent to Alexander von Humboldt. He would probably have had as little understanding for politicians who deny hard scientific facts as he would have had for scientists who do not want to have anything to do with politics.

After all, he made no distinction between “nature” and “culture”. He was equally interested in climate zones and icons. And his interest in revolutions was just as great as his interest in species of predators. Not only was he the father of ecology, he also founded pre-Columbian studies. And from a political point of view, I might add that he was an exceptionally political and democratic thinker! A free spirit who sought freedom not only for himself, who rather saw freedom as the fundamental guiding principle of any society aiming for openness!

Alexander von Humboldt still has much to tell us today. We need him, a person whose curiosity and love of nature and people inspired him to travel to places as far away as South America and Siberia, a person who as a “democrat at the royal court” repeatedly and in the face of considerable opposition calmly appealed for change.

That is why I am delighted to launch a very special project this evening during this anniversary year—the Alexander von Humboldt season, Humboldt y las Américas, of which I am very happy to be patron. German organisations and their local partners will bring Humboldt’s legacy to life

in many venues all over Latin America. Be it in the Humboldt Mobile, virtual reality headsets, a graphic novel or cultural events, Humboldt is alive!

We want to make use of the fact that he gave the countries of South America so much and is remembered and held in such high esteem here to lend significant fresh momentum to Germany's partnership with Ecuador and the entire region. After all, the geographical distance between our continents served more to motivate Humboldt than to deter him. And if this was the case back then, then it should certainly not be an obstacle to us today on the path to a closer and more intensive partnership between our countries and regions. We have much in common. We share many convictions and interests in this one world. Let us make even greater use of them in the future to generate productive ideas and joint solutions!

In conclusion, I thus have only one wish—that we will all allow ourselves to be inspired by the curiosity and delight of this great researcher, particularly when it comes to understanding and protecting our environment. It is up to all of us, to each and every one of us, to constantly ensure the necessary balance between ecological, societal and economic interests.

We must do better in the future than we did in the past. This is the responsibility of mankind for itself and for nature! This is Humboldt's message for the 21st century!

Thank you very much.