

10 October 2021

“The award recipients give us hope”

Ecologist and peatland researcher receive German Environmental Prize

Osnabrück/Darmstadt. Today (Sunday) in Darmstadt, the German Federal Environmental Foundation (DBU) honoured exceptional efforts in the fight against climate change and to protect biodiversity with one of Europe’s most prestigious and highly endowed environmental awards. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier presented the German Environmental Prize to ecologist Prof. Dr. Katrin Böhning-Gaese (56) and peatlands researcher Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Hans Joosten (66), who will be splitting the award, which comes with a remuneration of EUR 500,000. “The award recipients give us hope, because they have shown us the tools we can use to fight climate change and the species extinction crisis,” said Rita Schwarzelühr-Sutter, head of the Board of Trustees of the DBU. DBU Secretary General Alexander Bonde emphasized the award winners’ dedication: “We need an awakening for more climate protection and species conservation.”

According to Bonde, giving the German Environmental Prize to Böhning-Gaese and Joosten serves as an incentive for others: “If we take action, we can bring about change. Both award winners have proven this in a remarkable manner.” As Bonde put it, both have demonstrated “just how dramatic the climate crisis and the depletion of nature and biodiversity truly are. However, at the same time, they show us ways in which we can protect humans, animals and the environment in order to preserve our planet.” The head of the Board of trustees of the DBU, who is also Parliamentary Secretary of the Federal Ministry for the Environment, highlighted the impact that the German Environmental Prize has far beyond Europe: “The recent announcement that Prof. Dr. Klaus Hasselmann will receive the Nobel Prize in Physics at the same time is an acknowledgement for the German Environmental Prize.” Hasselmann received the award in 1998 – “for the climate models that have now earned him a Nobel Prize.” In this sense, the current award ceremony is leading the way, according to Schwarzelühr-Sutter. “We need to take climate protection and species conservation more seriously. The Board of Trustees selected this year’s winners for this very reason,” she said.

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Imminent transformation of our economy and society

Bonde said, this year's award ceremony is taking place during a period "that could mark a turning point in the fight against species extinction, droughts and global warming, against severe weather, storms and catastrophic floods." This is because the national and international political agenda in the coming days and weeks will much be setting future strategies: COP15, the 15th UN Biodiversity Conference, begins tomorrow in Kunming, China, followed by COP 26, the 26th UN Climate Change Conference, which will be held in Glasgow in Scotland – and in Germany, one of the world's leading industrial powers, a new government is being formed. Bonde: "We need to take advantage of these opportunities to introduce policies that protect the environment. There is no time to waste." The DBU Secretary General urgently appealed to all parties to "think about the economy and ecology as interconnected, and, preferably, to think in cycles." Bonde: "This is the only way we will be able to successfully tackle the imminent transformation of our economy and society."

Changes to ecosystems as the result of climate change

According to Schwarzelühr-Sutter, giving this award to Professor Katrin Böhning-Gaese, Director of the Senckenberg Biodiversity and Climate Research Centre, and Professor Joosten, who worked at the University of Greifswald until his retirement, sends a message: "We only have one planet Earth. And we need to treat the biodiversity of life on Earth with care. If we fail to do so, we only hurt ourselves." Böhning-Gaese has developed models that make it possible to predict how climate change will alter ecosystems. "Thanks to her research on the loss of biodiversity, we are able to grasp the devastating results of species extinction on humans, animals, the environment, and the ecological balance of the planet itself." The UN Biodiversity Council recently issued a warning that around one million of the planet's estimated eight million animal and plant species are threatened with extinction.

Peatlands are essential for climate protection

Schwarzelühr-Sutter called Joosten's peatlands research "ground-breaking in the fight against climate change." With his tireless efforts, he has demonstrated more than perhaps anyone else that peatlands are essential for climate protection "because they store massive quantities of carbon and prevent the release of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide." As Bonde added, re-wetting peatlands is "the order of the day. The draining and dewatering of peatlands, for land use in particular, must be reduced." It is important to work together with farmers and foresters to find solutions. With the term 'paludiculture', which he himself coined, Joosten has "already developed great ideas" for a climate-friendly productive use of wet upland moors and lowland fens – "and vehemently fought for peatlands to make it onto the agenda at international conferences. This is yet another reason why Kunming and Glasgow are so important."

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Background:

*With the German Environmental Prize, which is being awarded in 2021 for the 29th time, the German Federal Environmental Foundation (DBU) recognizes the achievements of individuals who have contributed to the protection and conservation of the environment in an exemplary way. The prize is awarded for projects, individual measures or to honour an individual's lifetime achievements. Candidates are nominated to the DBU by groups such as employer's associations and labour unions, churches, environmental organisations and nature conservancies, scientific associations and research councils, as well as media, trade and commercial associations. Individuals may not nominate themselves. A jury of independent experts from the fields of industry, science and technology as well as from various societal organisations is selected by the DBU Board of Trustees and makes a recommendation on who they feel should be awarded the prize for that year. The DBU Board of Trustees then makes the final decision. **Information about the German Environmental Prize and the award winners:** <https://www.dbu.de/umweltpreis> and <https://www.dbu.de/umweltpreis-blog/> (German only)*

IPTC-compliant photos are available for publication free of charge at www.dbu.de

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