

10 October 2021

# Steinmeier: Let us change course for climate protection and biodiversity

## Federal President presents German Environmental Prize

**Osnabrück/Darmstadt. With an appeal to our sense of solidarity as a global community, today (Sunday), at the darmstadtium conference centre in Darmstadt, Germany’s Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier called for a change of course to conserve biodiversity and stop global warming. At the awards ceremony for the German Environmental Prize, which is awarded by the German Federal Environmental Foundation (DBU), the German President stated that “change can only arise from solidarity”. And: “The ecological transformation will improve our quality of life.” The prize comes with a remuneration of EUR 500,000 and was split equally between ecologist Prof. Dr. Katrin Böhning-Gaese and peatlands researcher Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Hans Joosten.**

While, according to the Federal President, it is indeed uncomfortable and challenging to bid farewell to familiar consumption and eating habits. However, he said, we need to “debunk the myth that climate, species and environmental protection are mainly a matter of sacrifice, abstention and joylessness.” Quite the opposite is the case, the President said. According to him, the ecological transformation will offer us more freedom through mobility that does not consume any natural resources and independence from the conflict-ridden extraction of fossil fuels. “It will save us from environmental diseases and let us live healthier, longer lives; it will usher in a better future for us and those who come after,” said the President. He was pleased “that, today, we are honouring two scientists who have done exceptional work in the broad field of climate and species protection. Both have raised awareness about all that is necessary in order to maintain biological diversity and stop global warming.”

*“We humans are depleting the natural world.”*

According to Steinmeier, Böhning-Gaese has helped us to more accurately understand the root causes behind species extinction and how we can fight it. Around one million animal and plant species are currently at risk of extinction “because we humans are depleting the natural world. We clear forests in excess, exploit the soil, use toxic pesticides, catch too many fish, pollute the oceans with plastic waste,” said Germany’s Federal President. Joosten, on the other hand, is “a terrific peatlands researcher,” who was one of the first to point out “how important healthy, wet peatlands

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| <p><b>No. 114/2021</b><br/>Klaus Jongebloed<br/>Lea Kessens</p> | <p><b>DBU Press Office</b><br/>An der Bornau 2<br/>49090 Osnabrück<br/>Phone +49 541 9633-521<br/>Mobile +49 171 3812888<br/><a href="mailto:presse@dbu.de">presse@dbu.de</a><br/><a href="http://www.dbu.de">www.dbu.de</a></p> |  <p>#uwp21</p> |  |
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are for climate protection because they remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and permanently bind it to the soil." It was him who recognised the harmful effects of peatland drainage for agricultural and forest management on the climate and biodiversity, said the President. But Joosten did not merely issue warnings; instead, he developed ground-breaking ideas for the productive use of peatlands without jeopardising their conservation – and coined the term "paludiculture" to describe this concept.

*A major transformation of every aspect of our lives*

In his speech at the awards ceremony, President Steinmeier called upon the citizens of Germany to come together to effect change. "What we are facing is a big transformation task of our entire society; a revolution that will impact every aspect of our lives: the way in which we produce energy, design our mobility, farm, produce industrial goods, build apartments, dispose of waste; how we travel, shop and feed ourselves." Coming together as a society to work towards a climate-neutral future "without compromising our solidarity as a basis for freedom and democracy" according to Steinmeier will be "one of the greatest political and societal challenges we will face the coming years." During this process, it will be important to support "those who find it difficult to keep up with the pace of this transformation," said the President.

*Conferences on biodiversity and climate protection in Kunming and Glasgow*

On the global level as well, "cooperation and solidarity across borders" is essential in the fight against climate change and the decline of species, said Steinmeier. The UN Biodiversity Conference, which starts tomorrow (Monday) in Kunming, China, as well as the UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Scotland, in November, are opportunities for politicians to demonstrate that they have learned from the pandemic and are not reverting to "national self-interest. This is the historic task of the Glasgow conference." In response to the Federal President's references to Kunming and Glasgow and the close correlation between climate and biodiversity, DBU Secretary General Alexander Bonde said the following: "The fight against global warming and increased species conservation must go hand in hand. This is an issue that affects our future and humankind as a whole – and will ensure our survival and that of the planet." According to Bonde, Böhning-Gaese and Joosten have "worked tirelessly" to raise awareness of this issue. "We need to rapidly take note of these scientific findings and, more importantly, take them seriously." Bonde: "For Glasgow to be a success, the reduction of gigatons of greenhouse gas emissions aimed at by the conference, needs to be put in practice in Greifswald, Gladbach, Glückstadt, and elsewhere." And greater species protection as the result of the Kunming conference "will only work if biodiversity is also conserved in Kulmbach, Kuppenheim, and Kusel."

*Visiting flood victims: "You have not been forgotten!"*

We need to act more quickly and decisively, Steinmeier emphasised. "If we do not radically change course, we will irreparably destroy the living conditions on our planet." The Federal President

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recalled the catastrophic flooding in the Ahr Valley in July of this year. He will be visiting those affected this afternoon. "You have not been forgotten!" he said, addressing them. The effects of climate change "have also reached us here in Europe." And yet they have had an even greater impact on people in poorer countries in the southern hemisphere. "And the less we do now, the more severely they will impact future generations," said President Steinmeier.

Steinmeier gave the attendees of the ceremony hope for the future. "We all have reasons to be optimistic," said the Federal President. The COVID-19 pandemic showed us that our society has the power to change course. "And we learned how strong our community spirit is." More than anything, Böhning-Gaese and Joosten have demonstrated to all of us the following: "There's no reason to be frozen with fear and to simply wait around for the apocalypse. Climate change and extinction are not our fate." According to Steinmeier, the two award winners have shown "that we can be excited about the future if we continue what we have started with renewed effort, if we act more decisively and quickly, if we can reverse the tide in the coming years." Thanks to scientific research, technological and economic innovations, and "our ability to learn new things and change our lives," the path to a climate-neutral, biodiverse future is open.

### **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 Award and the award winners:** <https://www.dbu.de/2547> and <https://www.dbu.de/umweltpreis-blog/> (German only)*

**IPTC-compliant photos are available for publication free of charge at [www.dbu.de](http://www.dbu.de)**

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