

Press Release

September 5th 2017, Nr. 75/2017



From admonition to action: courageously bringing about a breakthrough in global climate protection

2017 German Environmental Award: Honorary Lifetime Achievement Award for Tony de Brum (†)

Majuro. "Tony de Brum, as a committed representative of the Pacific island nations, made a substantial contribution to the success of the 2015 Paris climate negotiations, and in creating the crucial prerequisites for the limitation of global warming to 1.5 degrees, a milestone in climate policy." – Today, with these words, Prof. Dr. Werner Wahmhoff, Assistant General Secretary of the German Federal Environmental Foundation (Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt, DBU), explained the award of the 2017 German Environmental Honorary Lifetime Achievement Award to the former Foreign Minister of the Marshall Islands, de Brum. "We owe the Paris Climate Accords to, among other things, his personal commitment and diplomatic skill. In the upcoming Bonn climate conference, further consequences must result from that commitment: worldwide, and with no exceptions." For his commitment the late de Brum, who died recently, will be posthumously honored with the German Environmental Honorary Lifetime Achievement Award, with its € 10,000 endowment, on 29 October at the DBU awards ceremony in Braunschweig by German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

Memorable experiences led to activity on climate change

As a young boy de Brum loved to play among the rocks on the beaches of the Marshall Islands beaches and to catch fish. Today, the tops of these stones can barely be seen at ebb tide. As a native of the Marshall Islands, which lie a mere three meters above sea level, de Brum observed the effects of climate change with particular attention: the rising sea level impacts his Pacific island nation with particular immediacy. Among his memorable experiences, de Brum always described the manner in which a ship was washed up directly outside of his bedroom window during a major storm.

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Giving coming generations a perspective

De Brum responded to the political challenges on the environmental front with committed, energetic action. As Foreign Minister of the Marshall Islands he made it his goal to offer the coming generations, too, a positive perspective. "For many years, de Brum was involved in all important international climate protection conferences and, above all, gave a voice to the nations and regions which are likely to be threatened the most strongly by the impact of climate change through the rising sea level and ever stronger weather events. This was certainly also due to his great personal drive," said Wahmhoff.

Bringing emphatic, committed service to the Paris Climate Accords

As Foreign Minister, he was the initiator of the so-called "Majuro Declaration for Climate Leadership", which was signed in September of 2013 by numerous island nations, by other nations, and by confederations of states including the European Union and the USA, for the reduction of greenhouse gases. Wahmhoff: "Based on the declaration, de Brum went to bat with a vengeance at the 2015 Paris Climate Conference for worldwide climate protection, and was a key player at the conference. With regard to the 1.5 degree goal for the limitation of global warming, in particular, de Brum held his ground and communicated persuasively the issues involved for his own native country." In the cooperation between different parties, de Brum saw a chance to implement ambitious climate protection goals and to move the responsible nations to act. Thus he also worked on bringing about the formation of the "High Ambition Coalition", an alliance of developing-, emerging-, and industrial nations which agreed on a unified compromise position at the climate negotiations in Paris and were able to give the associated demands strong credibility. This confederation of states ultimately achieved the objective of forging a global, legally binding, and meaningful multilateral environmental protection agreement between developing-, emerging-, and industrial nations.

De Brum cites the common task of climate protection

De Brum's political commitment for climate protection made a decisive contribution to the 2015 climate negotiations in Paris. He proved to be an eloquent, diplomatically skilled initiator, and with the High Ambition Coalition which he helped create, brought together actors from a variety of regions with a variety of opinions. "De Brum's work for global climate protection was always exemplary. With his highly sensitive approach, with great tact and admirable instinct, he did a great service to the cause of protecting our planet," said Wahmhoff in praising de Brum's lasting commitment and explaining the decision on the dedication of the Honorary Lifetime Achievement Award. Thus the award commemorates the model

work done by de Brum in the networking of less prominent actors, with the goal of influencing the “global players”. De Brum himself always emphasized that Paris was a cooperative achievement, and that this fact should serve as an orientation concept for future climate protection conferences.

Lifetime achievement: great political commitment for one’s own people

De Brum, born February 26th, 1945 on the Marshall Islands, grew up during a time in which the islands were under the administration of the United States and were used as a testing area for atomic weapons. After the USA granted the island nation independence in 1979, de Brum became its Foreign Minister and later held various political offices. In 2015 he received, together with the people of the Marshall Islands, the Right Livelihood Award, commonly known as the “Alternative Nobel Prize”, for his activities and courage in obligating the nuclear powers to nuclear disarmament. De Brum died two weeks ago in Majuro, capital of the Marshall Islands, at the age of 72.

Presentation of the Honorary Lifetime Achievement Award for the sixth time

Since 1993 the DBU has awarded the German Environmental Prize to outstanding pioneers of environmental protection. The award has “radiant power” and is intended to inspire companies, persons and organizations to recognize environmental problems and to develop and implement strategies for solutions. Wahmhoff: “This year’s Honorary Lifetime Achievement Award is meant to be a visible symbol of the achievement and influence of Tony de Brum in the global climate protection sphere, and the associated ambitious commitment.” This year, for the sixth time, the DBU presents the “Honorary Lifetime Achievement Award”, endowed with € 10,000, within the framework of the German Environmental Prize, which with its € 500,000 is the most highly endowed environmental prize in Europe. Previous recipients of the Honorary Lifetime Achievement Award include Mikhail Gorbachev, Professor Dr. Hannelore “Loki” Schmidt (†), Professor Heinz Sielmann (†), Hubert Weinzierl, and Professor Dr. Michael Succow.

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