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“The effects of climate change are already apparent around the world.”

The German President presented the DBU’s German Environmental Prize today in Erfurt

Erfurt. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier thanked “thousands of people” in Germany for ensuring that “mainstream society has truly become aware” of both the environment and environmental protection. At the award ceremony for the German Environmental Foundation’s (DBU) German Environmental Prize that was held today in Erfurt, he emphasized the fact that environmental issues and climate protection affect all of us, and that “every one of us can make a difference.” However, we can only combat an issue of this magnitude “if we view the environment and climate protection in a global context. Environmental issues do not stop at national borders, and neither does environmental protection. The effects of climate change are already apparent around the world, and they are a matter of life and death.” – Steinmeier personally handed over the richest independent environmental prize in Europe to marine biologist Antje Boetius (Bremerhaven) and an interdisciplinary team of wastewater experts from Leipzig made up of Roland A. Müller, Manfred van Afferden, Mi-Yong Lee and Wolf-Michael Hirschfeld.

“It will be fatal if one of the largest greenhouse gas emitters in the world withdraws.”

In front of an audience of around 1,200 guests, which included the Jordanian Ambassador to Germany, Basheer Zoubi, the Parliamentary State Secretary of the Jordanian Ministry of Water and Irrigation, Ali Subah, Thuringia’s Minister of Environment, Anja Siegesmund, and previous DBU award winner and former federal minister, Klaus Töpfer, Steinmeier, referring to the US, warned that it will be “fatal if one of the largest greenhouse gas emitters in the world withdraws and even goes as far as to call these multilateral partnerships into question.” Even though the road to global solutions can be bumpy and we will continue to experience further setbacks, we need to “work together across all governmental and non-governmental levels in order to create a larger working alliance.” President Steinmeier: “We are able to and will continue to make progress when all of us who still believe in multilateral solutions work together – and there are a lot of us around the world, even in the US!”

Steinmeier calls on Germany to fulfil its international obligations

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The effects of climate change have not merely been calculated or predicted for the distant future. We can already see them for ourselves today: melting glaciers, greater damage from more frequent storms, and shifts in the distribution of vegetation are all tangible signs, and this year, after a record-breaking summer, the topics of water and drought have become "kitchen table issues in Germany as well." We need to work together and act swiftly, Steinmeier warned: "And, of course, we in Germany need to fulfil the international obligations that we have entered into. I feel confident that we can do it! And others are counting on us, with our strong national economy, to continue to take a leading role the way that we did when it came to the introduction of renewable energies and environmentally friendly technology." Conflicts over the climate and environmental protection, such as the recent events surrounding Hambach Forest, are becoming increasingly rancorous. But in order for us to solve the countless, urgent problems that we are facing, all societal actors need to be involved so that we can continue to find a balance between ecological, societal, economical and industrial interests. It is encouraging that the UN's 2030 Agenda has already resulted in tremendous progress on an international level. The international community is able to agree on shared goals – also when it comes to climate protection. Like any multilateral agreement, the 2015 Paris Agreement was not perfect, but it has served as the basis for all further cooperation – "and it must continue to do so in the future."

"Climate change and water scarcity are forcing more and more people to flee."

Water is essential to our survival, and therefore protecting our water supply is also of central importance. In many parts of the world, more than two billion people do not have access to clean water, making survival a daily struggle. Steinmeier: "Increasingly, we are seeing regions go from receiving very little rain to no rain at all. Climate change and water scarcity are forcing more and more people to flee." For that reason, Steinmeier said, he is unsure if the Northwest Passage becoming more navigable is necessarily good news, but it is certainly proof that large-scale climate change will significantly change the conditions in the Polar Sea, and if the polar ice disappears, this would not only result in an increase in sea levels, and would not only endanger many coastal regions, but would also threaten the existence of entire island communities. Furthermore, if the polar ice melts completely, it could permanently destroy the balance of the earth's climate.

"You are also giving people hope, and that is extremely important."

For this reason, he was pleased to present the German Environmental Prize to scientists who are working to protect the world's fresh water supplies and oceans. Professor Boetius, for example, leaves no doubt as to how advanced climate change has already become, and on the urgency to act. But, despite this, her message is not pessimistic; rather, her optimism has the power to inspire others. For her, the hole in the ozone layer, which has evidently slowly begun to close back up now that the problem has been identified and the international community has introduced corrective measures, is an example that allows us to have hope in the rationality and accountability of our fellow man. The work of the Leipzig-based team of wastewater experts is making a significant contribution towards helping Jordan – one of the most

arid countries in the world – move closer to the United Nations’ goal of clean water for all, even though the country has opened its doors to more than 650,000 Syrian war refugees, and has unofficially taken on closer to twice that number. According to Steinmeier, the fact that Jordan continues to welcome these refugees is an act of generosity that “cannot be overstated.” For Jordan, protecting their valuable water supply is a matter of life and death. With their decentralised, flexible wastewater management systems, they have introduced a paradigm shift with the aim of nearly doubling the amount of treated wastewater in the country by 2025. About the prize winners, Steinmeier said: “They are not only achieving breakthroughs, but are also demonstrating solutions and alternatives, ways in which we can improve our future! And that is incredibly important in this age of crises, upheaval and uncertainty. They are showing us that climate change is not simply a foregone conclusion, but rather that we can do something about it and work to change our future.”

Jury praises the prize winners’ dedication

As a member of this year’s jury for the German Environmental Prize, which provides recommendations on the basis of which the DBU Board of Trustees selects the year’s prize winners, Heidi Foth (Director of the Institute for Environmental Toxicology at the Faculty of Medicine of Martin Luther University Halle) and Bettina Lorenz (co-founder of the initiative “Zukunft selber machen – Junge Nachhaltigkeitsideen e.V.” and DBU scholarship recipient) discussed the achievements of the 2018 prize recipients. Foth praised Boetius for being able to take a relatively complex field of research and disseminate it into the wider society. Boetius makes it clear that by breaking down methane gas, deep-sea microbes act as a sort of protective shield for us. Foth went on to say that Professor Boetius’ presentation was truly eye-opening for her: “We have a lot of work to do together.” About the prize winners from Leipzig, Bettina Lorenz said that they were not only able to provide the technological services required to develop wastewater treatment systems, but also install these systems in a region that is unusual for such a technology-oriented group. To succeed at all the levels required in order to implement this type of project is “incredibly impressive”.

Boetius: Vanishing sea ice, climate change, environmental pollution and plastic waste is “dramatic”.

In films that were shown during the ceremony and in discussions with the moderator, Judith Rakers, the prize winners once again made their positions clear. Antje Boetius said that the deep sea is one of the largest inhabited environments on the planet, and yet we have only researched a fraction of a per cent of it. She emphasized the importance of the microorganisms on the ocean floor that trap harmful methane gas, preventing it from escaping into the atmosphere. Boetius: “Without them, we would essentially live on a completely different planet.” When it comes to the global emissions of equally harmful carbon dioxide (CO₂), Boetius warned that we must act quickly: “While we sit here thinking about what we should do, if we really need to cut our CO₂ emissions, everything is already changing.” Boetius used the words “dramatic” and “scary” to describe not only the rapid disappearance of the polar ice and the speed at which the climate is changing, but also the significant quantity of pollutants and

plastic waste that are ending up both on the ocean floor and the ocean surface. For her, "it's all or nothing, right now." We need to take the knowledge acquired by observing the deep sea and our climate and earth models and "bring it directly to our society in order to determine how we need to prepare ourselves for the future." Boetius: "This is absolutely essential!"

"We can make a tangible difference in terms of conserving resources and promoting wastewater treatment."

Roland A. Müller, a member of the Leipzig-based team that received this year's prize, pointed out the fact that approximately 90 per cent of wastewater around the world is discharged into the environment either untreated or poorly treated. For that reason, it must be our goal to significantly increase the amount of clean, treated water available "for future generations." Local solutions are particularly environmentally friendly because the waste water is treated and stays in the community where it was created, and where it can be reused, explained Mi-Yong Lee. When it came to the wastewater project in Jordan and building a wastewater research and demonstration centre near the border to Israel, it was important to raise awareness among the local population through direct contact so that they could develop a personal connection the solutions being introduced, said Wolf-Michael Hirschfeld. This type of process can "help stabilise the situation and improve communication between the countries," added Manfred van Afferden. Müller, summarising: "Naturally, as researchers we can't save the world; but I think that our work has demonstrated concrete ways in which we can help to conserve resources and promote wastewater treatment."

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