Words of welcome by the president of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, Prof. Dr. Hans-Christian Pape, on the occasion of the New Year’s Reception, 17 January 2019

(check against delivery)

Anniversary years are a bit tricky. Some you are duty-bound to observe, others you don’t even register, and some take you completely by surprise.

But some announce themselves well in advance with a subterranean rumbling that gradually gets louder and louder: by the appearance of yet more biographies that don’t just line the shelves but top the best-seller lists and are suddenly on everyone’s lips. By enthusiasm for a person that becomes contagious.

One of these anniversary years has now begun. And you would have had to have spent the last few months in a bivouac up the Chimborazo or some other remote place not to have got the message:
The 14th September 2019 is the 250th anniversary of the birth of Alexander von Humboldt. And that’s something we at the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation want to celebrate together with our network, with you.

So, please look on the hours we are spending together today not only as a reception but as a birthday party – and the launch of a whole year during which we want to celebrate the man who gave us our name with a host of activities and initiatives.

But quite apart from this milestone birthday, why is everybody celebrating Humboldt this year? What is it that still makes him so fascinating?

One thing we know about our birthday boy is that he soon got bored at receptions. Humboldt was restless, he loved adventure. He courted danger and took unwise risks.

More than once, this nearly cost him his life: Aged nearly 60, he has himself winched to the bottom of the Thames in a diving bell. To a depth of 11 metres he is fed oxygen through a leather hose. His head pounds, and he starts bleeding from the nose, symptoms he knows only too well from his death-defying mountain climbing in Latin America – where he was once almost buried by an avalanche.

Ensconced in his diving bell, perhaps he also remembers how, as a young man, he was nearly asphyxiated in a mineshaft.
Or his journey on the Orinoco, where hungry crocodiles accompanied the non-swimmer’s rickety boat.

These stories tell us about Humboldt the adventurer: the daredevil scholar who explores the world instead of sitting at his writing desk.

A Prussian Indiana Jones, if you like.

It is the image of a daring discoverer who risks his life for curiosity’s sake.

And this image is probably one of the reasons why Humboldt was so popular – and still is.

Above all, however, it illustrates what a superlative PR professional he was. Because Humboldt knew how to tell the world about his adventures. He was a master of self-promotion.

Depending on time and place, there are many such images of Humboldt. Let's just consider Germany after the Second World War.

In the West, many saw him as a Transatlanticist and symbol of the ties with the West because of the time he spent in the United States.

In East Germany, on the other hand, he was reclaimed as a socialist thanks to his commitment to the miners. And he was seen as an anti-imperialist who had liberated the people of Latin America from colonial oppression.

So, Humboldt as an early precursor of Che Guevara?

Why not? Humboldt is and was, after all, also a projection surface onto which we direct what we want to see in him.

That’s why there isn’t just one Humboldt, but lots of them.

I myself think of him as a personality who is still relevant today because, in many respects, he was way ahead of his time.

His thinking transcended the boundaries between subjects and countries, and he was a networker who shared his knowledge with others.

Quite rightly, in my opinion, he is considered a pioneer in many fields such as holistic ecological thought and the popularisation of science as well as in fostering a worldview that is open to the views of other countries and peoples.

He was convinced that progress is made when people pull together to address problems and contribute their different points of view.

Today, on his 250th birthday, he is more relevant than ever. He warned about the consequences of ecocide at a very early stage and he is considered the founder of modern climate science.
He was a marketing genius, a networker who tirelessly communicated by letter. He loved pithy sentences and punchlines. He held lectures for a broad public, which for him explicitly meant including women who were otherwise excluded from Prussian universities at the time. He took a stand against slavery, colonialism and exploitation.

Today, he would probably tweet – against climate change sceptics, fake news mongers and populists. Perhaps he would even take on Donald Trump in a Twitter fight – who knows?

I believe science communication would be important to him.

His need to communicate was boundless, according to contemporaries like Charles Darwin, who hardly got a word in edgeways when they met. Humboldt simply talked his head off – or so the anecdote goes.

But today, Humboldt wouldn’t only have to talk and explain what’s what, he would also have to listen and engage in dialogue. Because to enhance the transparency of and trust in science is one of the greatest challenges we face. We must help ensure that suggestions for solving societal challenges scientifically gain easier access to social discourse and are examined there. This may very well generate new science. I think Alexander von Humboldt would have been highly enthusiastic.

In everything he did, Humboldt was passionate and completely unimpeded by economic common sense. By the end of his life he had indeed spent the family fortune, for travel and disastrous publications. Where would he get the money from to pursue his dreams today?

I am a big fan of German research funding and have myself benefited greatly from our system.

But just imagine Humboldt on a quest for third-party funding. Who would take the financial leap of faith required to support his high-risk projects?

At the Foundation that bears his name he might be lucky because we sponsor excellent individuals and not projects. I certainly hope we would recognise the young Humboldt’s potential if he applied to us for post-doctoral sponsorship.

The global trend is to target funding at highly-specialised experts and projects that promise applications. In Germany, we value and sponsor fundamental research. I sincerely hope that this will continue because it is precisely this – our valuing fundamental research, free thinking and searching – that gives us an edge in the global competition for the best minds. It is something we experience time and again.

But nevertheless, I still ask myself whether Humboldt’s holistic “everything is interconnected” approach would succeed in the German competitive funding system.
I believe we need more scope for the interdisciplinary, the visionary, the extraordinary and the unpredictable. The Humboldts of today and tomorrow must not be allowed to slip through the cracks.

Humboldt promoted young talents. What would he say about our young researchers’ career prospects today? I think he would advocate career paths along a clear trajectory with steps at recognisable intervals and levels – today we would say: structured career paths with a transparent job profile. In the German science system, I believe we are moving steadily in this direction. “Fostering the younger generation can ensure the state’s future scientific glory,” Humboldt wrote in 1846.

Where would we meet Humboldt today? Would he be investigating the melting permafrost in Siberia? Or would he mainly be travelling to international conferences? Would he hold a chair in Berlin or Münster? Or would he have turned his back on Germany as he did then? Would he now be in France, the United States or China?

I leave these questions unanswered and invite you to have your own thoughts on the matter.

Anyway, as part of our jubilee campaign we are asking politicians, academics and our network to answer questions like these in short videos that can be viewed on www.humboldt-heute.de.

I have brought along a brief example from our network. It lasts about a minute.

So, visit our website and be inspired: make your own short video on your smartphone and upload it. We would be pleased to see it!

For me, Humboldt today means being a role model in many ways.

I have already mentioned important key words: curiosity, risk, daring, openness, taking a stand.

Every researcher, in my opinion – and not just researchers – can and should follow the example of these values that Humboldt imbued with life.

In my first year in office as the President of the Humboldt Foundation I have certainly done my best to do so.

Together we asked ourselves: How can we generate even more new ideas and, at the same time, make our network productive, use it strategically? In the context of our profile and portfolio, how can we acquire the scope and resources for new activities and innovative formats that are important to us? How are we contributing to science communication or the freedom of science? Can we find new ways of efficiently identifying the best talents whilst doing something to relieve the burden on the review system?

These are major themes and we don’t have answers, let alone patent solutions, to all of them. But as Humboldt himself said, “He who seeks to achieve great
things, must begin forthwith." I think we have made visible progress and I am looking forward to the way ahead.

But now I don’t want to test your patience any longer. Just allow me to express my sincere thanks to you all, friends and partners, Humboldtians, political representatives, representatives of the Federal Foreign Office, the Ministry of Research, the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the Environment Ministry, for your support in the past year as well as in the year to come.

Let us now proceed to the promised birthday party. We have chosen the music and the menu to fit with Humboldt and his itineraries. I think he would have enjoyed himself because, even if he didn’t actually like receptions, he would undoubtedly have relished the food.

I hope you will now enjoy the evening, too, and engage in lots of interesting conversations.

Have fun and thank you for your attention.