

Top environmental scientist slams ‘un-American’ Trump

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José Sarukhán, the winner of this year’s Tyler prize for Environmental Achievement, will use his speech at the award ceremony to criticise President Donald Trump’s science policies as flying in the face of American values.

Trump’s approach is a “complete departure from what the United States has been about”, Sarukhán said in an interview with *Research Europe*, ahead of the prize, which will be awarded in Washington DC on the evening of 4 May.

The US has historically boasted “the world’s strongest scientific community and most important universities and research centres”, he said, but those are now under threat.

Mexico-based Sarukhán one of the world's leading biodiversity researchers, will receive this year’s Tyler prize, an award established in 1973 to recognise outstanding contributions to environmental preservation.

Sarukhán is credited with convincing former Mexican president Carlos Salinas to create a government department dedicated to biodiversity in 1992. The national biodiversity commission, called Conabio, was one of the world’s first. It now has a \$14-million annual budget and is directed by Sarukhán.

US environmental policy is one of the topics that Sarukhán will touch upon when he delivers his Tyler prize lecture. His talk will be followed by a panel discussion with US environmental scientists including Jane Lubchenco from Oregon State University and Harold Mooney from Stanford University.

“I cannot conceive of a beneficial public policy that is not based on scientific facts and information,” Sarukhán said. “Science has been used for the development of the US as a country. But Trump’s decisions, such as the people he has nominated to take charge of relevant agencies, are not good signs for the future.”

Trump has enraged climate activists by nominating Scott Pruitt, a critic of US federal environmental regulation, to head the Environmental Protection Agency, and Daniel Simmons, an opponent of renewable energy, to oversee the US Energy Department’s renewable energy office. The president also proposed potentially devastating reductions in both agencies’ budgets.

However, those cuts were fended off by negotiators in the bipartisan budget agreement struck by Congress on 30 April. The final \$1 trillion spending bill, which will fund the US federal government until September, sets the EPA’s budget at about \$8 billion, a relatively modest trim of \$81m or 1 per cent below its current operating level. The advanced research programme at the Department of Energy will receive a \$15m budget increase, despite Trump’s plans to cut its spending in half.

This is good news for environmental research—but in order to protect global biodiversity, governments should combine concrete policies with public outreach, according to Sarukhán. “They must establish zero-deforestation policies and communicate to people in an accessible, understanding and reliable way” about the importance of protecting our planet, he said.

Article information

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