



The paddle steamer *Princess Alice* sinks in the Thames, in an image from the *Illustrated London News*

3 SEPTEMBER 1878

Tragedy unfolds on the Thames

Hundreds are killed as a paddle steamer sinks

On the evening of 3 September 1878, a paddle steamer ploughed back up the Thames from Sheerness to London. It had been a lovely warm day, and the *Princess Alice* was packed with families who had enjoyed a day out at the seaside. On the main deck, a band was playing. But with so many children sleepy, many parents had chosen to take them inside – a decision that would have terrible consequences.

Some time around 7.30pm, as the ship entered Gallions Reach, its captain suddenly realised that they were on a collision course with a much larger ship coming the other way, the collier *Bywell Castle*. The captain yelled out: “Where are you coming to! Good God! Where are you coming to?” – but it was already too late. With an enormous crunch, the *Bywell Castle* ploughed through the side of the paddle steamer, effectively slicing it into two. Within just five minutes, it had sunk beneath the waves.

Even by London’s standards, the stretch of the Thames where the *Princess Alice* sank was especially foul, with so much sewage that boatmen gagged as they passed through. Now, hundreds of men, women and children floundered desperately in the fetid waters, weighed down by their clothes. Aboard the *Bywell Castle*, crewmen tried to throw them ropes, lifebuoys, even chicken coops to cling on to. But it was no good. It was a horrific scene.

After 10 minutes, the screams died down. The disaster was over, and perhaps 640 people were dead. **H**

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WHY WE SHOULD REMEMBER...

Alexander von Humboldt, an intrepid scientist who reimagined the natural world

BY ANDREA WULF

TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS AGO, on 14 September 1769, the scientist Alexander von Humboldt was born in Berlin. The son of wealthy aristocrats, he later left his life of privilege behind and spent his fortune on a five-year exploration of South America. This daring journey shaped his life and made him the most famous scientific figure in the world. He was adventurous, restless, relentlessly curious and a visionary thinker.

Humboldt wrote about the “ancient connection” between Africa and South America more than a century before scientists began to discuss shifting tectonic plates, invented isotherms (the wavy lines we still see on weather maps today) or discovered the magnetic equator, and he was the first to talk about global climate and vegetation zones. Most importantly, he came up with a new concept of nature that still shapes our thinking today. Humboldt described Earth as a living organism, and explained that nature was a web of life, an interconnected whole in which everything was bound together – from the smallest insect to the tallest tree. He also understood the devastating effects of deforestation, irrigation and monoculture. Humans, he warned, were destroying the natural world, and he talked as early as 1800 about human-induced climate change.

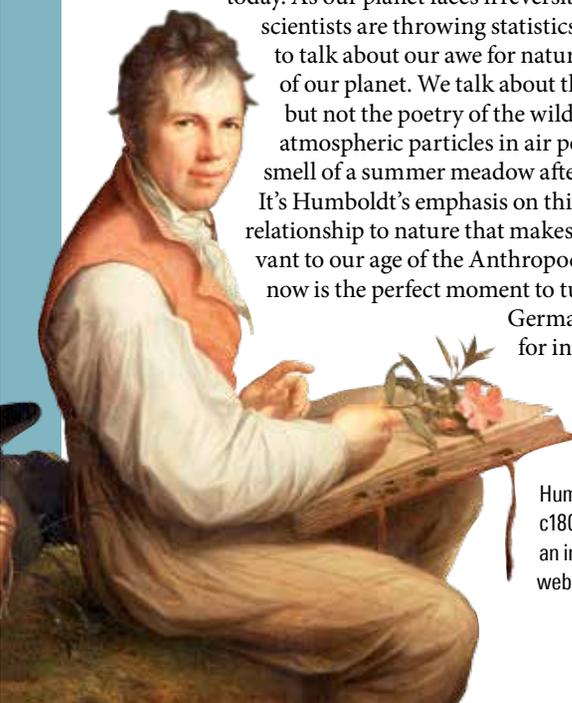
His ideas influenced scientists, artists, poets and politicians alike. Charles Darwin said that Humboldt was the reason why he boarded the *Beagle*, while the German poet Goethe declared that spending a few days with him was like “having lived several years”. Thomas Jefferson pronounced him “the most scientific man of his age”. Today there are more places, plants and animals named after Humboldt than anyone else – from the Humboldt Current to the Humboldt penguin and even a region on the moon.

He was not only a prescient proto-environmentalist, but also believed in the power of imagination and emotions. At a time when other scientists were searching for universal natural laws, Humboldt insisted that man had to also use his feelings and imagination to understand the natural world. For me, this is one of the most important aspects of his work for us today. As our planet faces irreversible global heating, politicians and scientists are throwing statistics and numbers at us, but few dare

to talk about our awe for nature, or the vulnerable beauty of our planet. We talk about the rising acidity of our oceans but not the poetry of the wild dancing waves; about the atmospheric particles in air pollution but not the glorious smell of a summer meadow after a sudden rain shower.

It’s Humboldt’s emphasis on this emotional relationship to nature that makes him so relevant to our age of the Anthropocene. Maybe now is the perfect moment to turn to this great German naturalist for inspiration. **H**

// Humboldt talked about climate change as early as 1800 //



Alexander von Humboldt, painted in c1806, saw nature as an interconnected web of life



Andrea Wulf’s latest book is *The Adventures of Alexander von Humboldt* (John Murray)