

This Mexican ecologist's major environmental award stands for everything Trump doesn't

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Tyler Prize, Jon Black

[Project Earth](#)

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Amidst growing tensions between Mexico and the United States, a Mexican ecologist, José Sarukhán has been awarded the [Tyler Prize](#), one of the world's oldest and most prestigious environmental honors.

The Mexican-born son of Armenian refugees received the award for his lifetime work on biodiversity at a private ceremony held in Washington, D.C. last Thursday just minutes away from the White House and the president—who isn't really big on science, Mexicans, or refugees.

While the awards committee made it clear that their choice was in no way political, professor Sarukhán took the opportunity to challenge the [current administration's assault on science](#).

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“Society must become alarmed when science is silenced, manipulated, or otherwise compromised,” Sarukhán said during his acceptance speech. “Truth doesn’t come from arguments of authority, such as denying the overwhelming scientific evidence of climate change and loss of biodiversity on Earth and their close connection to human activities as the cause for those changes.”

Voicing the charged emotions that brought so many to the streets during [last month’s marches for climate action and science](#), Sarukhán urged everyone to “fight back against those who would foist upon us public policies devised in a fact-free bubble.”

He also criticized the president’s ambitions to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, citing the devastating effect it would have on the land and animals shared by the two countries.

“If this wall is built, many mammal species, such as Jaguars, will not be able to move freely in their original territories,” Sarukhán said in a lecture before the awards ceremony. In addition to jaguars, the wall as envisioned would potentially [threaten over a hundred critically endangered species](#) like ocelots, black bears, and Mexican grey wolves.

Like Trump, Sarukhán also wants to make America great again, but for the ecologist that means investing in scientific research, rather than building walls and expanding offshore drilling. “A sound and enlightened government must support excellence and independent scientific activity for the public good and the global commons,” he said. “And it should be adequately funded. This is precisely what has made the U.S. the great nation that it is.”

Professor Sarukhán is the 76th recipient of the Tyler Prize, joining the ranks of scientists like Jane Goodall and Jared Diamond, as well as his Mexican colleagues Mario Molina and Arturo Gómez Pompa. Created in 1972 by John and Alice Tyler, the prize is awarded to professionals in the fields of environmental science, health, energy, and medicine. Candidates are nominated by their peers and selected by an international committee based upon how their work preserves the environment for the betterment of humanity.

The Founding Father of Ecological Research in Mexico

Often referred to as the founding father of ecological research in Mexico, professor Sarukhán is best known for founding [the Comisión Nacional para el Conocimiento y Uso de la Biodiversidad \(CONABIO\)](#), an inter-department government agency focused on understanding and protecting Mexico’s rich biodiversity. He began his academic career as a biology professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in 1972, and became the reagent of UNAM in 1989. He served in that position for eight years, devoting much of his research to addressing the issue of mass deforestation taking place in Mexico and Latin America during that period.

In the early 90s, Sarukhán was approached by then-Mexican President Carlos Salinas asking what he could present at the United Nations Earth Summit taking place in Rio. As a result, Sarukhán convinced the president to fund CONABIO, an organization that he had been dreaming of for some time. It would become his life’s legacy. Since its conception in 1992, CONABIO has helped inform environmental policy in Mexico, and is today home to the largest species database in the world with over 11.2 million specimens.

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“He (Sarukhán) had the courage to move from the comfort of well-recognized science into governance issues, into policy influencing issues,” said the chair of the Tyler Prize Committee, Julia Matron-Lefèvre. She added that professor Sarukhán was able to attract so many politicians and students to his cause – many of which were present in the audience Thursday – because he “took it upon himself to explain his science in a simpler language.”

“It’s possible that the reason science is not so trusted in some places today is because perhaps scientists haven’t taken a deep breath and explained carefully in a direct, simple manner what they are doing,” Matron-Lefèvre said.

Bridging the Gaps

In Sarukhán's view, CONABIO served to bridge the gap between an often unreachable academia, the government, and society. Today more than ever, he believes these sorts of bridges are needed to make the scientific community accessible to policy makers and the public. "What makes a good democracy is not the capacity to vote, but the capacity to vote with intelligence," he said

At 76, he still chairs CONABIO and is now focusing on "citizen science," using crowdsourcing platforms to gather information from amateur ecologists all over Mexico. In only three years since beginning the program, he says that over 20,000 people have contributed, with four new species already discovered by amateurs.



Courtesy of Tyler Prize, Andrea Valencia

Professor José Sarukhán

For the veteran ecologist, getting people to understand the interplay between the variety of life on this planet is crucial to grasping just what is at stake today. "Our consumption of the world's renewable productivity has increased so relentlessly that we are consuming the patrimony of future generations," he said during his acceptance speech. "The most damaging result of what we are doing to our planet is the progressive loss of biological diversity. The organisms that we are destroying so rapidly have provided all of our food, most of our medicine, and many of the other materials we use to support our lives."

Over the past 40 years, the strain placed on ecosystems worldwide by climate change, deforestation, pollution, and overfishing has caused [Earth to lose around half](#) its wildlife. [Studies published in 2015](#) estimate that a further one in six of the planet's species could be lost if world leaders did not act on climate change immediately.

Like many in the science community, Sarukhán is flabbergasted by climate change deniers. "It's like saying you don't believe in thermometers," he said, adding that it's this sort of thinking that threatens not only to the continuing

legacy of this nation, but to the existence of our species.

“People in positions of power have written and discarded laws and regulations for a long time, but no one of us has the power to rewrite the laws of nature,” Sarukhán said during his final remarks in Washington. “Sticking your head in the sand is not an option.”