Invited editorial

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Academic exchange between the United States and Germany has a history spanning the past 100 years. The very existence of DAAD, the German Academic Exchange Service, is rooted in these transatlantic relations. In 1922, invited by their American peers, 13 German students traveled to North America. Three years later, along with the Institute of International Education (IIE), these pioneers founded the “Academic Exchange Service” in Heidelberg. Today, some 90 years later, DAAD is the world’s largest organization for academic exchange. Every year, DAAD supports approximately 65,000 students and academics in more than 250 exchange programs covering all disciplines and practically all countries around the world. As DAAD helps to fund the exchange of 6,000 Germans to North America and 2,000 Americans and Canadians to Germany every year, the DAAD New York together with the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation decided to host a major alumni meeting for their former grantees from the USA and Canada in New York City in October of 2010. The event was co-sponsored by the German Center for Research and Innovation New York.

The conference, entitled *Facing the Four Elements: Developing a Transatlantic Approach to Sustainability*, was primarily organized so that DAAD and Humboldt Foundation could reconnect with their alumni, provide participants with an ideal opportunity to network within the

alumni community, and in this way encourage possible collaboration. This special edition of *The Environmentalist* is one of the fruits of this alumni event.

As the DAAD New York office has served as a transatlantic mediator for German and North American artists, students, researchers, and scholars for over the past 40 years, it was natural to include the transatlantic component in the conference’s topic. However, the theme of the meeting also intended to extend beyond the DAAD’s mission and include a subject that would make the conference more relevant to today’s world trends. Therefore, we turned to one of the currently most discussed areas: sustainability. Whether one is talking about arts, fashion, architecture, science, food industry, renewable energy, natural resources, technology, etc., the issue of sustainability is omnipresent in contemporary discourse.

The topic of the conference was sufficiently broad to attract scholars from many different fields of studies, which goes hand in hand with DAAD’s mission to fund all disciplines. Therefore, we reached out to alumni from all fields who have had intensive research experience in Germany and come from a professional or academic background relevant to the conference topic. The turnout was spectacular. One hundred and twenty participants with backgrounds in natural science, civil engineering, architecture philosophy, art, digital media, medicine, and nuclear energy, to name just a few disciplines, attended the meeting. The feedback we received after the conference confirmed that this was one of the biggest and most successful interdisciplinary conferences hosted by DAAD in recent years.

Of the 120 participants, 36 had an opportunity to present their most recent research pertaining to the dual themes of the conference. The quality of the papers presented was so good that Dr. Peter Kevan, one of the speakers, invited all

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the presenters to submit the extended versions of their articles for review to potentially be published in a special issue of *The Environmentalist*. The articles that were ultimately selected for publication are collected in the present issue and represent above all the interdisciplinary nature of

the event and the high academic standards maintained throughout.

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Director, DAAD New York