

## Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) (2019 Sestercentennial)

Alexander von Humboldt was an eminent scientist of the late 1700s to middle 1800s. Arguably the most famous man in the world when he died, he is largely forgotten today for several reasons, none of which lessen his scientific prowess.

But his legacy lives on in many place names in Nevada (for instance, Humboldt River) and around the US. His name is incorporated into over 100 animal species and over 300 plant species.

Primarily a biologist, he is known for his landmark expedition to Central and South America in 1799-1804 whereby the number of known plant species was doubled. This expedition rivaled the Lewis and Clark expedition in scope and impact, nearly at the same time. Humboldt met with then president Thomas Jefferson in 1804. Humboldt went on to leave his mark on climatology, meteorology, oceanography, geography, mineralogy, petrology, and geomagnetism, as well as the life sciences. Often called the father of ecology, Humboldt preceded the coining of the term. He was an inspiration to Charles Darwin in coming to the theory of evolution and was influential in the thinking and writing of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir.



Humboldt saw the world, both animate and inanimate, as totally connected and wrote often about this. He ended his career by publishing a 5-volume work called *Kosmos* in which he attempted to encapsulate all known scientific findings. He was a tireless promoter of science and basically began science networking and international cooperation in science. Perhaps the last of the science generalists, the breadth of his work overshadows any perceived lack of depth.

In 2019, we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of Alexander von Humboldt (sestercentennial). It is an appropriate time to reintroduce this great man to the world.