

2014 Mono Lake Committee Scholarship – Patty Anne Hensley

After slipping off my shoes, I walk slowly through the sand down to the water's edge. Alkali flies buzz around my ankles as I dip my toes into the icy water. A light breeze pushes the stray hairs of my braid across my face and brings the salty air into my nose. As I close my eyes and draw the cold air into my lungs, I hear the gulls' barking song. The constant sound of the water lapping against the shore erases the to-do list from my mind and allows me to relax.

The sun's timing is impeccable; it sinks behind the mountains the cup Mono Lake in a protected basin. As its rays lengthen, the Sierra wave above me ignites into otherworldly shades of tangerine and violet. The surface of the lake mirrors this transition, emphasizing the sunset's beauty. I nestle further into my down jacket as the sky slowly fades to a deeper purple.

While sitting on the beach, staring into the depths of the lake, I can't help but confront the smallness of my own existence. I ponder the several million years that it took for Mono Lake to become this salty, and for the castle-like tufa towers to form. Looking to the north I see the terraced remnants of a much larger ancient Mono Lake. The eons that it took for the water level to rise and then fall to its current level puts the significance of my struggles into perspective and allows me to relax. For a few brief moments, I feel more connected to the natural world.

I hear another gull's cry and the lake's importance expands. I think of the tens of thousands of birds that rest here every year as they migrate from South America to Canada, and cannot imagine the consequences if the lake were to disappear. This single isolated basin extends its influence far into the southern hemisphere and north into the Arctic. I ponder the reverberating echoes of its reach across other oceans and continents, and I want to join in.

As I begin the walk back up the boardwalk to my car, I am overcome by the unique sense of peace that emerges from comparing myself to something as vast and old as this lake. I ponder the fact that the lake is not only home to countless brine shrimp and alkali flies, nor just a migratory rest stop for tens of thousands of birds, but is also a place to pause and recognize the minuteness of our own lives. It is when we acknowledge the finite scope of ourselves that we are removed from our own private spheres, and are able to realize that we are part of a much larger world.