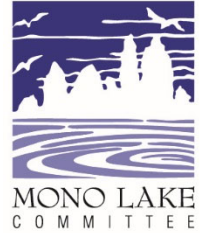


2026 Mono Lake Committee Scholarship

essay by Estrella Romero



The wind pushes against me as I stand near the shore of Mono Lake. The water is darker than usual and the strong gusts create waves that crash against the tufa towers. As the waves move toward the shore, white foam that almost looks like dish soap stays close to the edge of the water. As I look around, I see many tufa towers, some in the lake and others outside of it. Some are taller than others and each one has a different shape. Looking at them reminds me of learning how tufa towers show how high the lake level once was because they can only form underwater.

Far off in the distance, I can see an enormous dust storm. I have seen dust storms before, but never one as big as this one. Even though I am far away from it, it still looks threatening, almost as if the sand had been building up for years just to create this giant storm. Even the birds seem afraid of it because I haven't seen any today. It feels like they are protecting themselves from the wind and dust, which makes me wonder if I should have stayed home too.

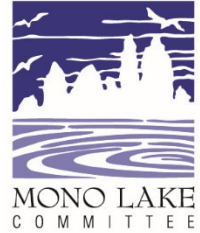
But Mono Lake has always been unpredictable and that is part of what makes it special. You never know what you might see or experience when you come here. Every time I visit the lake or look at it from my house, it always looks different. Some days the water reflects bright shades of blue. But today, it appears dark and heavy. Mono Lake almost seems to have emotions of its own. Depending on the weather, the color of the lake and the movement of the water are always changing. Growing up near Mono Lake and seeing it almost every day never gets boring. Instead, it makes me even more curious about it.

Places like Mono Lake matter because entire ecosystems and nearby communities depend on them. Nesting birds use tufa towers and islets to protect themselves from predators. The lake also affects people who live nearby. When water levels drop, dust storms become more common and can affect the health of surrounding communities. Many communities around Mono Lake also depend on tourism connected to the lake to support local businesses and provide jobs.

Mono Lake is not just part of where I live, it is part of my daily routine, memories, and experiences. Standing here in the wind and watching the waves strike the tufa towers while the sandstorm grows in the distance, I realize that Mono Lake's changing nature is exactly what makes it so unique.

2026 Mono Lake Committee Scholarship

essay by Julian Santiallan



Some places become important because people travel far to see them. Others become important because they quietly shape the people who grow up beside them.

Growing up in Lee Vining, Mono Lake has never felt like a tourist destination to me. It has always felt personal, something tied deeply to my childhood, my community, and my understanding of responsibility. Through experiences like Experiencia Ambientalía, I have spent years learning about ecosystems like Mono Lake. However, sitting quietly beside the shoreline without distractions gave me a different perspective.

When I sat near the shoreline, the wind moved steadily across the water, carrying the sharp salty smell of the lake mixed with the scent of sagebrush. Small waves tapped softly against the shore while clouds of alkali flies hovered near the waterline, moving together almost like smoke. Beside me, the rabbitbrush thrived in the alkaline soil, surviving in conditions that at first seemed too harsh to support life. Looking out across the water toward the tufa towers, everything felt still, yet alive at the same time. In the silence, I started noticing details that I would normally overlook.

As I sat there longer, I started thinking about how easy it is for people to overlook places like Mono Lake. Beneath its calm surface exists an entire ecosystem that depends on the stability of the lake. This lake supports trillions of brine shrimp and alkali flies, which in turn support millions of migratory birds traveling across the hemisphere. Because of the love that comes from living beside a place as magnificent as Mono Lake, generations of people have fought to protect it and built a community dedicated to preserving it.

Growing up in Lee Vining means growing up hearing about the history of the lake and the fight to save it from excessive water diversions from the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. Even after decades of environmental damage and water diversions, the lake continues to survive because of the generations of people who care enough about it to protect it. Sitting quietly by the shoreline reminded me that conservation is not just about science or laws, but about protecting places that support entire ecosystems while also shaping communities and inspiring people to care about the world around them.

My connection to Mono Lake has become even stronger through my participation in Experiencia Ambientalía, where I worked alongside students from Argentina studying saline lake ecosystems similar to Mono Lake. That experience helped me realize that environmental conservation is not only a local issue, but something that connects communities around the world. It made me proud to come from a small town where people genuinely care about protecting the environment around them. Places like Mono Lake matter because they remind people to slow down and pay attention. Through resilience and responsibility, Mono Lake reminds me that even a small community like mine can help preserve something extraordinary for future generations.