

THE LEOPOLD WRITING PROGRAM

2021 ALDO LEOPOLD WRITING CONTEST AWARD WINNER



PIPPA BARRETT

BEST ESSAY Grades 6-7

My family and I normally go up to Canada to spend the summer with my grandparents, but this year due to Covid-19, we stayed in New Mexico and went backpacking, rafting, hiking, and biking. This opened my eyes to New Mexico and its mountains, rivers, deserts, and valleys. Sitting in my bedroom in February, with snow on the ground and a ten-degree windchill, I long to be outside or having just come in from a long hike, with my feet sore, my legs cramping, feeling incredibly happy.

One weekend in August, I went backpacking with my best friend, her family, and my sister and dad, in Santa Barbara Canyon. We hiked in six miles and set up camp in a meadow along the Rio Santa Barbara. We sat on the ground eating ramen for dinner, and because of the wind and some clumsy hands, we spilled quite a lot of it. We woke up in the morning to a heavy dew on our tents and hiked seven miles to the top of North Truchas Peak. All of a sudden I was filled with joy. I live in a beautiful state, with many different ecosystems and diverse wilderness areas. By the end of the day, I had hiked 21 miles, my longest hike ever. I was proud and tired.

In his essay “Wilderness for Recreation,” Aldo Leopold writes, “Wilderness areas are first of all a series of sanctuaries for the primitive arts of wilderness travel, especially canoeing and packing. I suppose some will wish to debate whether it is important to keep these primitive arts alive. I shall not debate it. Either you know it in your bones, or you are very, very old.”

After my adventures last summer, I know it in my bones. I know that we need to keep outdoor recreation alive. We need to save our animals, plants, soils, and rivers. And not just for recreation, but for future generations and the health of our planet. Even though the Covid-19 pandemic seems to be winding down and we can now travel out of state, I still call New Mexico my home and I will still go outside and get dirty. Just last week, my family and I went for a walk on the mesa above Ojo Caliente. High overhead, we saw many flocks of migrating sandhill cranes flying north from the Bosque del Apache, as they do every February. You could hear their high-pitched warbling, like mice gargling salt water. They looked like planes coming in and were flying in a V formation, changing places every few minutes. Above us there seemed to be an uplift, as the cranes circled and flew higher. It was mesmerizing to watch the wetland birds shift and swirl with calculated precision and to know they are connected to the land and rivers, as we all are. They are making their annual journey north towards Canada, as I long to do as well.