

**Audrey Lund, Placer High School,**

The American River Canyons are home to my fondest memories. I have lived in Auburn since I was two years old, and they will forever be my favorite part of this small, buzzing town. My father, a busy and hardworking man, seems to soften when he is surrounded by our local nature. I am able to truly connect with him when we are out hiking along the river or skiing on Lake Clementine. We don't have to speak to each other while we are out, the quiet and serene trails bring us together in a way I otherwise am not able to. With our dog running happily ahead of us, only returning to ensure we were still following her, I found that within nature I am able to experience true bliss. During the COVID pandemic, the canyons became even more essential to me than before. When the world became overwhelming, I would leave and lose myself on the trails, searching for the euphoria I knew I was bound to discover there. I spent countless hours exploring them alone, with friends, and with family.

My summers are filled with long hikes in the heat, rock jumping, picnics beside the water, and sunset watching along the canyon. Now that social media has exploited the beauty our small town holds, the otherwise sleepy trails have become bustling with new activity. With more individuals visiting the trails and river, the once quiet canyons became well known and busy. Inevitably, the new crowds of visitors began to disrespect the nature surrounding us, leaving trails of garbage in their paths. But, this issue is not unsolvable. Although the canyons will remain popular, the pollution can be removed to allow the Auburn River Canyons to return to their natural beauty. I take action into my own hands and pick up litter every time I go hike along these trails. I truly believe small acts lead to big changes, and though a few pieces of garbage at a time may not leave an immediate difference, it is a start to keeping these trails beautiful. It is vital to me to continue helping our trails in any way possible to ensure other people are able to experience them in the same ways I do.

This will be my final summer living in my childhood home, as I am leaving for college at Sonoma State University this fall. I will miss the canyons and the beautiful nature our historical town holds. I will miss long hikes with my family and friends, exchanging stories that have taken place within Auburn. But, when I remember the place I was raised, my mind will immediately go to our serene nature holding countless memories, and they will be the first thing I describe when new friends ask about my home town. These trails and rivers have raised me to love and appreciate nature, something that will stay with me for the rest of my life, which I am forever grateful for.