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Yosemite Alcoa Scholars

4 August 2019 - 17 August 2019

With each step, as the incline steepened and my dirt-caked legs became weaker, I continuously scanned the mountainside, hoping for a moment of rest. Suddenly, my fatigue was forgotten, an overwhelming smell of smoke taking its place. Hiking closer, my group-mates and I noticed a potential wildfire hazard, of which, with just a week of experience in the field, we were far from experts. Regardless, we crept closer to the smoldering rock-pile, clearly a failed attempt to extinguish a campfire from the night before. Using what little resources we had, we formed a line, filling water bottles and passing them along to meticulously put out the fire. Hours later, we came to a stop on the top of a small peak, deciding to make camp for the night. Spreading out the supplies, we analyzed our surroundings, careful to take note of the specifics of the environment around us. With our makeshift compass, we plotted the terrain, observed the canopy layout, and determined the fire danger factor of this area. I found it thrilling to have the opportunity to put to use the skills which I had been developing for years.

When I was accepted as an Alcoa Naturebridge Scholar, I was excited to discover all of the beauty and wonders of the Yosemite wilderness which I would be exploring throughout a two-week trip. I hoped to fully immerse myself in nature, as well as learn about the cultures of the diverse group of students I was with, further driving my curiosity and motivation to learn more. Having the chance to spend these weeks in the wilderness, exploring and learning, was an opportunity which I have been dreaming of for years.

My mind comes to focus as I emerged from the shaded protection of the canopy, finishing our descent into the Yosemite Valley and finally rejoining civilization. Our return was bittersweet, as we were reluctant to leave each other and the incredible natural beauty, although relieved to see plumbing for the first time in a week, among other missed amenities of the modern world. Standing in the Yosemite Valley, thousands of feet below where we had been just days before, we organized our data and presented our findings with rangers and other members of the Yosemite community. Presenting our conclusions, I was able to see the impact of our explorations and dedication on such a large scale, and reflect on everything we had accomplished during the past week.

As years go by after this trip, I know that I will never forget the experiences that I shared with the amazing people I was fortunate enough to meet throughout, in both the front and backcountry. I know that I will never forget the feeling of making our way to the top of Eagle's Peak, as the slowly, an awe-inspiring sight of Half-Dome emerging from the valley comes to view. I will always remember the nights spent laying under the stars, not allowing ourselves to fall asleep before seeing a shooting star. These inspiring experiences, although becoming daily activities throughout our backcountry adventures, never ceased to amaze, always showing us the scale of the world around us, giving us a strong sense of appreciation for everything around us.

In addition to the large-scale, life-changing experiences that I know I will hold with me for the rest of my life, I also hope to continue to appreciate the smaller memories that truly completed the trip. From playing sardines (an alternative hide-and-seek) throughout the WWII bunkers in the hills above the Golden Gate Campus and highly-competitive four-square games behind the cabins at Crane Flat, to games and riddles on the trail and hours spent with many new

friends, who days earlier were just strangers. Rather than remembering my experiences in Yosemite by a few 'highlighted' moments, I remember this program by the huge collection of memories that I formed, and the amazing people that I was fortunate enough to share them with.

For many years to come, the experiences that I had throughout these two weeks will always hold value in the many new ways that I have been taught to think and learn. Culturally, I was given the chance to learn so much more about many different cultures around the world, finding many ways in which my life is very similar, as well as very different. On the trail, my leaders taught me the importance of preserving our environment, and many ways to do so. Through stories and self-experience, I was shown how our actions, even those considered small and insignificant, can greatly affect the natural world. The value of this program is the many ways in which my life will forever be changed afterwards, through a growing appreciation for everything and everyone around us, as well as newly learned ways to serve that appreciation. Many years later, I hope to continue using the specific skills as well as the environmental morals that I have learned to help protect nature and help others continue to experience similar life-changing opportunities in the beauty of the natural world.