Last June, the School of Natural Resources commencement exercise was graced with the following address by graduating senior, Julie Rechtin. It is reprinted here on the premise that while faculty members sometimes feel students often do not understand them, the reverse may also be true.

Now that you have gained so much knowledge from people who are only too aware that education makes you realize how little knowledge you have, you are welcomed into the real world of leaders of the future to face great challenges, changes, and frustrations in the coming years of hope and turmoil. Thank you.

Now that's over with, everyone look out the window. In case your mind has been drifting out there already, don't feel guilty - the redwoods steal the show every year. After the ceremony ends, take a walk out in the community forest and you'll see why.

The trilliums are turning from white to purple, the salmonberries are turning an edible red, the shrews and mountain beaver are tunneling in the duff, and if you sit for awhile, the douglas fir will start moaning and the banana slugs will crawl over your shoes.

I've surveyed this forest, tested its soils, keyed out its flora, trapped its rodents, run for hours on its slippery clay trails in the rain, eaten its Himalaya berries - I come out with answers to questions I didn't know I'd asked, humility when I thought my problems were important, strength when I was frustrated. The forest is the kindest teacher by having no sympathy with self-pity, or jealousy, or self-importance. If you think this is graduation rhetoric, take a walk and see for yourself.

Walk on down to the river, too, You'll come slogging out of the grand firs into the alders and rushes, out onto the floodplain, down to the Mad River or the Eel or the Klamath. Watch the river moving, stare at it until the surface becomes a field of waving lights, stare until you see a spring salmon or a lamprey or a water skimmer. Watch the rocks move; feel the time change; watch the river's course change, the river's mouth moving north or south with the years. Watch it flood the barns, carry off cows and houses, scour new channels. Watch it and learn the power of movement.

Walk to the beach. If you stay long enough, the fog will roll in, the dunes will shift, the kites will hover and carry mice into the sky before your eyes. The sea will pound and pound and pound; the waves come in whether any people are there to see them or not. Look at that ocean and try to imagine how much water is in it - go out to your coast and find out what it has to teach you.

You can go by yourself; you can go with friends or family.

Now look at those people. Take hold of the hands of the people next to you.

Everyone in this room is linked to everyone else. At Humboldt, it seems, the world gets small very quickly. Your roommate's friends turn out to have known a study partner's co-workers, the cashier at the Co-op folk danced with your landlord the other night, and a stranger at a potluck turns out to work on the same environmental newsletter you do ... so no one here is holding the hand of someone they don't know.

At Humboldt, I have found a community more cohesive and caring than anyplace I have ever lived. People tell me that Arcata does not reflect the real world, that we are sheltered, too much of a utopia, too idealistic ... but thank God there are places like this so that we realize there are alternatives, that there are places where people know that they have the power to change something in their town, be it just a bike bridge over the Mad River, or a clearinghouse on safe energy, or rearing salmon in our sewage.

This is a place where people create their own culture, where we wind May poles in the quad, and gather at night to pick and strum our own
bluegrass. This is a place where the people have fought big fires all over the West, fished in Alaska, counseled suicide cases, built their own greenhouses, started their own businesses—and they bring it all back to their community. Maybe I was lucky to find a place where I fit in, but I’ve found lots of other people who say the best friends of their lives have been made in this county.

I think the value of the degree I’m receiving has just as much to do with these friends and this land as it does with this university. I was lucky to find teachers here that recognized that and kept me from holing up in my books—teachers who took me to pulp mills and fault scarps and azalea preserves, teachers who sponsored my journalistic attempts, inspired me to spend hours in the dunes or in city council meetings, laid out running routes through the woods, people who encouraged me to take off quarters to work in the Park Service and travel in the desert—people who realized that school is not a shelter from the world, but a way to keep your mind open while you explore it.

I’ve come out of this somewhat a cynic, somewhat hopeful, confused, clarified, and excited. I think I can better cooperate and share and I want to test that. The newts and the alders have given me knowledge and I want to apply that. I’m learning that I can actually enjoy being responsible for my actions.

But don’t just take my word for it—walk among our gardens, swim in our rivers, hug our people, watch our flickers. It took me only a couple hours on my first visit here to know I’d spend my next five years here; maybe you’ll see a little of what I did.

And for those of us who’ve been lucky enough to live here, may you take the Humboldt spirit with you where you go. In the span of our careers, the world’s population will double, and the pressure on the resources we are managing will be tremendous. If we don’t cooperate with each other and the earth we will become bitter and apathetic very quickly. Congratulations and keep your faith.