

A Living Laboratory

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by Kathy G. Rawle

On the mainland, summer camp is a chance for kids to experience environments different from home: sunshine, swimming, outdoor games and cooking out. But here on the Big Island — where all that is available year round and close by — what's the point of camp?

Of course, for many families, camp is what enables both parents to hold down jobs while school is out. But for organizations with an eye to the long-term health of the island, summer camp is an opportunity to educate Hawaii's children to become stewards of their environment.

Using the Island of Hawaii as a "living laboratory," The Kohala Center of Waimea "seeks knowledge and solutions to the environmental challenges faced here and around the world," according to its website. A major focus of the center's work is K-12 educational programs, including a variety of summer camps.

Right now, a group of campers entering grades 2-6 is investigating the rocks of Hawaii, observing geological formations, exploring caves and visiting Kilauea, "the most active volcano on the planet." This is Week Three at Waimea Nature Camp, a joint venture of The Kohala Center, the Outdoor Circle and Hawaiian Walkways. The camp, directed by Melora Purell, a master's degree candidate in conservation biology at the University of Hawaii in Hilo, is built on "values of respect for the earth and environment, service to the community, striving to understand nature," again according to the website. Week One centered on study of forests, at Ulu La'au Nature Park in Waimea and on field trips to native forests. Campers learned about trees, roots, seeds, birds and fungus while playing forest games and other activities. Week Two centered on tide pools, shoreline creatures, and the effects of tides. While collecting shells, the kids learned to distinguish the parent rocks of sand grains. Next week, flowing water is the theme, with a look at the patterns of water flow, as well as the plants and animals found in our streams. Campers will net small fish, collect stones and explore valleys.

Also ongoing this week is Susan Lehner's Oceans of Hawaii: Science, Legend and Myth 5-day day-camp for students entering grades 4, 5 and 6. Creator of "What in the World?" a science program for kids popular with homeschoolers, Lehner developed a program specific to the Big Island that teaches children age 8-12 "why the water and its creatures here are so special," Lehner said. The result is the Oceans of Hawaii camp, co-sponsored with The Kohala Center. She combines up-to-date science with the ancient Hawaiian versions of things.

"The ancient Hawaiians were really good scientists!" she said. "We learn about vertebrates and invertebrates; then we snorkel and see them. They create a book to take home, while learning what they can do to be sure the waters and its creatures continue to thrive.

The camp takes place at the Hapuna Beach Prince, where the hotel has provided a room next to the beach at Turtle Cove.

For middle schoolers, next week's Beach Ecology and Coral Habitat Exploration and Science (B.E.A.C.H.E.S.) program, offers a week-long over-night camp. Started last year, as "Ocean Educators of Hawaii," campers sleep in tents on the beach at Ke'eji, near Kealakekua Bay in South Kona.

According to Lehner, camp director, "We'll do all the things we did last year like tide pool exploration, both day and night, and day and night snorkeling to compare observations during the different times of day. The kids will do a research project about a marine animal, from which they will prepare a presentation for their parents on the last day of camp." In addition, she said, "this year campers will learn CPR, first aid and aquatic safety. We'll explore ocean careers, talking about our involvement with the ocean so far. The idea is to teach kids to be ambassadors for the

ocean, to teach others and hopefully some will get involved in careers that will help maintain the ocean. But, especially, we'll have fun: we'll play Hawaiian games, like the Hawaiian version of jacks and marbles. We'll do crafts and woodcarvings, like last year's tiki, make kukui-nut necklaces, and go on an invertebrate scavenger hunt,"

Last year's camp was so successful, said Carolyn Blake, the Kohala Center's program manager, families asked for a way to experience what their kids had during camp. As a result, this year is the launching of the "Ocean Ohana Camp," also at Ke'ei Beach, Aug. 4-6. Students who receive their "Ocean Educators" certificate at the B.E.A.C.H.E.S. camp will become leaders for this weekend program, enabling families to explore coral reef ecology together.

At the high school level, two programs build on the knowledge and leadership in the environmental field. Island students have attended the Brown University Environmental Leadership Laboratory (BELL) programs offered both on the Big Island and in Rhode Island, where campers study the estuaries of Narragansett Bay and engage in leadership activities and skill-building. The second program, for girls entering 11th and 12th grades who excel in math and science and want to learn more about careers in engineering, is co-sponsored with Cornell University. The "Curie Academy" one-week residential program in Ithaca, N.Y., this year focuses on environmental science, "introducing students to experimental modeling, computer modeling, and field observation techniques using state-of-the-art tools," according to the Cornell University website. The university/ Kohala Center partnership includes a spring semester field program in earth and environmental systems, with students housed at Hawaii Preparatory Academy's upper school campus.

For elementary-age keiki to high school seniors, camp this summer offers a chance "to get excited about science," said The Kohala Center's Blake, "and to recognize that science, culture and social issues are all part of the same package. And, if any of these camp experiences spark their interest, they have a pathway to learn about opportunities for their academic and professional futures."