

Local environment could be workplace of future

Program at Haleakala exposes youths to the possibilities

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HALEAKALA NATIONAL PARK -- Usually when the word "environment" comes up in conversations on Maui, it's associated with sweeping landscapes that feature some of the best places on the island to relax or play.

This summer, as in summers past, Haleakala National Park hopes to get high school kids and recent graduates thinking about the local environment as one of the best places to work.

"I'd love to see young people on Maui take an avid interest in pursuing careers up here," says Peter Kafka, maintenance supervisor for the park. "Some of us are getting a little gray and while we're not ready to retire, it would be nice to know we've got some good young people ready to follow."

Kafka coordinates the Youth Conservation Corps and Student Conservation Association, two programs that this year have provided the Haleakala park with more than a dozen teenagers who are spending their summer vacations repairing trails, counting nene, planting taro and learning other aspects of what it's like to work for a living in Maui's great outdoors.

The kids — like their parents — are often surprised at the variety of jobs possible.

"I think a lot of people think careers in the environment means something like 'hug a tree,' but it's so much more than that," says Cathleen Natividad Bailey, the longtime endangered species specialist at the park.

"It's everything from field workers to environmental lawyers. We're in the computer age, so we need people to do Web pages. And, at the same time, we need people who are willing go into the backcountry and get down and dirty."

All five of the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) workers are Maui students, born and raised on the island, but they became interested only after intense efforts by park leaders to attract the crew. Just one of the 10 participants in the Student Conservation Association (SCA) hails from Maui (the rest are from the Mainland) — and he knew about the program simply because his aunt works at Haleakala.

Bailey, Kafka and others agree that education and promotion of the programs remain a challenge but should become a priority to get more Maui students on board. And because so many of the environmental careers on Maui are closely linked to the Hawaiian culture and native species, they'd like to see more Native Hawaiian kids wearing those khaki uniforms.

"It would be so great to have more young Hawaiians involved in the management of Hawaiian things," says Art Medeiros, the research biologist who has made a mission out of including Hawaiians, as well as others, in his reforestation projects. "If our young people go to the Mainland because they don't know of some of the opportunities here, then we've failed. We've truly failed."

Medeiros would like to see Hawaii's schools — including elementary schools — add environmental curricula to their studies.

"Increasingly, I think there is more information, but it usually comes down to one or two stellar teachers who

do this on their own,” says Medeiros. “It’s the whole thing of getting people to understand how special Hawaii is and letting young people know what kinds of jobs are out there.”

Very often, it’s those influential teachers and creative school programs that get kids thinking — and working — outside of the classroom.

Kyle Niehaus, a member of the YCC crew who recently graduated from Seabury Hall, says he was introduced to the Maui environment in the 6th grade.

“We went on a field trip to Waikamoi, and that got me interested,” says Niehaus, who is headed to the University of California at Berkeley, where he might pursue a career in environmental education.

The same thing happened in the 6th grade to Ziggy Mizner, 27, a Hana boy who has worked with Bailey in the endangered species program for 16 years — and hopes it’s a job that will last until retirement.

Mizner says it was Hana teacher Linda Estrella and park worker Terry Lind who arranged for the students to go on a supervised hike through Haleakala Crater that got him hooked. Amidst the towering cinder cones and silverswords, Mizner knew right then what he wanted to do for the rest of his working life.

Bailey would like to see more of a coordinated effort where teachers can request a park specialist — or anyone else who works in the environment on Maui — to speak to their classes or take school groups on tours of special places.

“I think that’s an important part of it,” says Bailey. “People working in the field need to go out and talk to the kids. The students need to see someone in fatigues, someone with bird poop on them. They need to hear it from the heart so they can relate and maybe think ‘Wow! That could be me.’”

The YCC, a federal program that’s been operating since 1970, and the SCA, a national program sponsored by a private foundation, have partnered with Haleakala for quite some time. Kafka gives credit to Sharon Ringsven, volunteer coordinator and acting chief of interpretation, as well as Superintendent Don Reeser, who also tends to think outside of his job description.

“I’ve seen Don out there working on the trails with the kids,” says Kafka. “You’re not going to find too many superintendents doing that.”

Such enthusiasm from the staff can only get the kids more excited about possibly someday joining them for a career.

“It gives you the chance to learn more about Maui,” says Niehaus. “We really don’t know that much about the island where we live. Before, we just saw the park on the surface, and not from the inside.”

The inside view of the park on the crew’s two-month schedule goes from the taro patches of Kapahu, the living farm at the Kipahulu neck of the park, to the floor of Haleakala Crater, where they will take part in the annual nene survey next month.

For their sweat, the kids are paid \$6.25 an hour. The added education they get is free.

“You become more familiar with native species, and it makes you more sensitive to certain issues,” says Kale Haywood, 18, another recent Seabury Hall graduate. “Some people don’t think highly of the National Park Service, and this shows you that it’s good.”

The YCC crew also includes Maile Werner and Haley Woods, who both will be juniors at King Kekaulike, and Jody Barbin, a Seabury Hall graduate. The kids — as well as Kafka — are quick to applaud Gale Plana, the

field supervisor. Because Plana doesn't like to be interviewed, Kafka speaks up to sing his praises.

"The key to YCC is leadership," says Kafka, "and Gale just has a gift with teenagers. He communicates particularly well with students. This is successful because of him."

The SCA is an all-volunteer program that often sends more recruits from the Mainland to Maui than local kids because it's better known in other states than it is here. This year, however, Baldwin student Robert Tada heard about the opportunity and earned one of the slots. Tada had been encouraged to join by his aunt, Raina Kahola'a, a biologist who works at the park. Kahola'a got her start with the YCC.

Tada is thinking about a career as a park ranger.

"I wanted to get some kind of experience and go for it when I'm out of school," says Tada, 16, who will be a junior.

Of course, careers in the environment very often mean working in the environment, which includes backpacking to remote locations in all kinds of weather and finding accommodations not quite like the Ritz. That alone cuts down on the pool of those who might be interested, notes Bailey.

"It's not a job for everybody," she admits. "You've got to be willing to be away from your family at times, sleep outside and use the bathroom when there's not always a bathroom to use."

However, those job requirements, difficult as they might seem, are offset by perks few other employees enjoy.

"People save their whole life to come to Maui, and we're privileged enough to see the most ancient and pristine parts as part of our work," says Medeiros. "And who could ask for a better office? It's the most beautiful office in the world."
