Volunteer youths learn value of environment

By Kalani Wilhelm

Seven years ago, John Leong took part in a summer program that taught him how the environment makes Hawai'i a special place to live.

Now, as coordinator of the Youth Conservation Corps, Leong is trying to pass along the values he learned to the young people of today.

The six-week program is a hands-on summer learning experience open to students in high school and college, and is aimed at educating Hawai'i youth on conservation issues such as wildlife management and habitat restoration.

This year's 12-member O'ahu group just completed a weeklong restoration and cleanup project at He'eia Fishpond in Kāne'ohe, where they planted lülu and removed mangrove.

Noah Thomas, a junior attending college in California, said he used to fish on the outskirts of the pond but never knew it existed.

"I lost touch of what Hawai'i is about," the 21-year-old from Kailua said yesterday. "YCC helped me get back in touch with the land."

When Leong, 25, took over the youth corps in 2001 it was a fledgling program with only 16 students based out of Kaua'i.

The youth corps had been shut down a number of times because of lack of financing, Leong said. Along with fellow youth corps alumnus Matthew Ramsey, he decided to revive the program as a way of giving back to the community.

This summer, enrollment has grown to 70 and now includes students from O'ahu, the Big Island, and Moloka'i.

"The traditional Western classroom setting benefits many, but we hope this provides an alternative to education, help develop, and provide self-confidence and strength for our youth and for the future," Leong said.

Chelsea Dudoit, 17, who will be a senior at Mililani High School this fall, said the youth corps helped build an awareness of and appreciation for her environment. She called the program "an awesome experience."

Upon completion of the program, the students — who are eligible for three college credits at the University of Hawai'i — are rewarded with a stipend. They also may continue volunteering or receive internships through similar conservation organizations.

Youth Conservation Corps is administered by the Forestry and Wildlife Division of the state Department of Land and Natural Resources, and partners with Kamehameha Schools and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Jaret Lum, an 18-year-old Kalahoe High School graduate, said the youth corps has helped build his confidence and social skills.

He said receiving the stipend, which ranges from $1,000 to $3,000, is nice, but the real incentive is the hands-on experience.

"It's unreal. I've learned so much. I got to go to places in Hawai'i no one has ever been to," he said. "Even if it was for free I would still do it."

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