

Making waves

Keiki, adults plunge right in to UH-Hilo's Ocean Day

by John Burnett
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Families enjoyed music, food and fun -- for example, touching live octopi and sea urchins -- at the second annual Ocean Day Hawaii held Saturday at Puhi Bay in Keaukaha.

The event was hosted by the University of Hawaii at Hilo's Pacific Aquaculture and Coastal Resources Center and the Marine Science Department, in partnership with the University of Hawaii Sea Grant. The site was PACRC's 12.5-acre shorefront facility.

"It's just beautiful; we couldn't have asked for a better day," said Kevin Hopkins, PACRC's interim director and an aquaculture professor at UHH.

Subtitled "Year of the Reef," the free, family-friendly educational event, celebrating Hawaii's coastal heritage and resources, featured demonstrations and activities by more than 30 organizations, community groups and agencies.

The turnout was phenomenal, according to Sharon Ziegler-Chong, PACRC associate director, who coordinated the event with Masaki Takabayashi, an assistant professor of marine science at UHH.

"We figure we have about double the number of people from last year, which means about a thousand people," Ziegler-Chong said.

The younger keiki, in general, seemed to have the most fun -- counting fish in aquaculture tanks, interacting with scuba divers during demonstrations, directing robot-like remote-operated vehicles underwater and enjoying a close encounter with zooplankton using a powerful microscope.

"Every booth had some sort of activity, so it wasn't just a poster telling you something. It's truly interactive," Ziegler-Chong noted.

Especially popular with the youngsters were the "touch tanks" -- a marine petting zoo of sorts. Richard Cromwell, a UHH marine science major, said that the tanks contained "marine invertebrates collected from Onekahakaha Beach Park" in "fresh salt water, cycled -- the tanks are aerated to keep them alive."

Maddie Turner, an 8-year-old Kaumana Elementary student, may have a leg up on a career in marine science.

"These are called invertebrates," she lectured while gently massaging a sea cucumber. "They're very



Brothers Joao, left, and Daren Garriques hold clams and oysters like those found in Kaneohe Bay, Oahu. These 11/2-year-old specimens are being raised in greenhouse tanks on the University of Hawaii at Hilo's Pacific Aquaculture and Coastal Resources Center, in hopes of developing a viable bi-valve industry in the state of Hawaii. Saturday's annual Ocean Day opened the gates of the Keaukaha facility to the community, providing hands-on educational activities focused on celebrating Hawaii's ocean and coastal heritage. - Photo By William Ing/Tribune-Herald

cool and they feel kind of slimy. Some feel OK."

Maddie's dad, Jason Turner, an assistant professor of marine science at UHH, watched proudly as his daughter and other keiki examined the marine life.

"It's an amazing experience and I think it's something that we take for granted," he said. "Just because the kids are going into the ocean doesn't mean they recognize that all of these creatures are there, and that there are some that they can pick up and handle and get to know a little bit."

Kuky Haumea, a 7-year-old second-grader at Ka 'Umeke Ka'eo Hawaiian Immersion Public Charter School in Keaukaha, gingerly plucked a small octopus from the tank, while Cromwell gently reminded the keiki not to lift the creatures fully out of the water, because they can't breathe and will undergo stress.

"It was kind of scary, but it tickles," Haumea said of the eight-armed cephalopod.

Tyler Jeschke, 5, a Connections Public Charter School kindergartner, cupped a sea urchin in his tiny hands.

"Feels spiny," he said of the creature, which resembled a balled-up baby porcupine.

Despite the spines, the urchin has more to fear from humans than humans do from it.

"The dangerous species are all in the tank over there, like the large cone shell and the Hebrew cones and textile cones," Cromwell noted.

In addition to the venomous species, the "no-touch tank" contained creatures too delicate to be handled, like the nudibranch, a strikingly colorful soft-bodied, shell-less gastropod mollusk, and the sapsucker slug, one of the few animals able to photosynthesize. It should be noted that no animals were harmed during Ocean Day.

"After Ocean Day is finished, a few of the species which were already at home in the tanks at school will be returned," Cromwell said. "And the rest of the species will be returned to where we found them at Onekahakaha. So none of these will die."

Lisa Parr, a marine science instructor at UHH, said that Cromwell and his fellow student-volunteers were excellent ambassadors for both the university and for marine awareness.

"Our student-volunteers have been great interacting with the kids," she said. "We talked to every kid in Hilo; I'm pretty sure of it. I think we saw every single child that's in the entirety of Hilo town."

On the Internet: <http://www.uhh.hawaii.edu/~pacrc/>

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