

CELEBRATING EARTH DAY

Isle students teach on Earth Day

A group from Lanikai Elementary School puts up informative signs on Mokunui

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THE WEDGE-TAILED shearwaters that nest on the Mokulua islets off Lanikai Beach have some real friends.

Yesterday, Earth Day, students and former students from Lanikai Elementary School installed informational signs on Mokunui, the larger of the two islets.

They joined in Earth Day activities ranging from cleanups to educational tours that will continue today and tomorrow.

Two large, colorful signs explain how visitors to the Mokunui islet, most of whom paddle there by kayak, can care for the plants, animals and insects that live there.

One simple way to help the shearwaters is to inspect kayaks for ants before leaving Oahu, the signs advise.

Kayakers can unknowingly "bring a certain kind of ants that can eat the eggs of the shearwater birds," explained sixth-grader Jackie Bersson. "So you should check your kayak for stowaway insects."

Another tip: don't go tromping up the hill. Shearwaters nest in holes in the ground and a misplaced foot can bury them alive.

The shearwaters are a Pacific seabird that spend winter at sea, but nest on Hawaii's coasts and offshore islands between March and November, with eggs hatching in July.

The information on the signs was researched by students starting two years ago, when they were in the fourth and fifth grades.

Sheldon Plentovich, a doc-



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Before exploring the island yesterday, students from Lanikai Elementary School put up signs telling Mokunui islet visitors what lives there and how to protect the environment. Kayla Gillespie, left, Kelea Browne, Michael Sylvester, Taylor Dewey, Juanita Kaopulki and Dakota Walker tasted sea urchin eggs.

toral candidate in zoology, and teacher Donna Therrien, now a resource specialist for the Department of Education, teamed up to provide students with a chance to meet and work with a real scientist.

Plentovich taught the students things like how to design bug traps, how plants and animals got to the isolated Hawaiian Islands from other places, and why alien species can throw an ecosystem out of balance.

But, she said yesterday, "I think the one who learned more than anyone through all of this was me. These kids obviously really care about nature. They

just needed tools for how to take care of it."

Bersson said she used to think of a scientist as "a person in a white suit, with their hair pulled back, pouring medicine in a bottle." Now, she thinks of a scientist as someone more like Plentovich, who spends her days observing how removing alien ants from Oahu's offshore islets improves life for native species.

"And now I want to be a scientist," Bersson said.

Sixth-grader Dakota Walker said he felt "a feeling of relief, a feeling of joy," to have the signs in place.

Walker said he's always liked nature, but since participating in this project, "I'm a naturalist now. And I want to be a herpetologist (reptile specialist)."

Artwork on the waterproof plastic laminate signs includes paintings and drawings by the students, descriptions of the plants and animals people are likely to see on the islet, and tips for not messing up the ecosystem while there.

"Mahalo for respecting these islands so that future generations will be able to enjoy Hawaii's native wildlife," a statement by the students says on the sign, right next to their

group photo.

With the signs in place, "I bet every person who visits the Mokulua will learn something and begin to care about our islands," Therrien said.

As the children gathered in a circle yesterday by the newly mounted signs on Mokunui, their Hawaiian studies kupuna Juanita Kaopulki led them in a Hawaiian blessing chant.

"It feels good" to have the signs up, sixth-grader Kayla Gillespie said. "I hope that people figure out that these islands are special and they should watch out where they are going."