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Environmental scholars from Asia study island sustainability

KAMUELA, Hawai‘i—[June 22, 2010]—A group of 20 undergraduate scholars from Burma, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand visited Hawai‘i Island June 2–8 as part of a U.S. Department of State-sponsored innovative environmental leadership program hosted by the East-West Center.

The students experienced Hawai‘i Island as a model for successfully addressing global environmental challenges at a local level as part of the U.S. Department of State’s Study of the United States Institute (SUSI) for Student Leaders on Global Environmental Issues. SUSI is designed to foster a greater understanding of sustainability in the United States and aid in the development of more resilient communities in their home countries. The institute focused on three key topics: 1) developing sustainable systems for natural resource and agricultural management; 2) food, energy, and water security; and 3) ecotourism.

“The Island of Hawai‘i models the world’s challenges in areas such as food self-reliance and energy self-reliance,” said Matt Hamabata, executive director of The Kohala Center, which partnered with the East-West Center for the Hawai‘i Island portion of the institute. “This island imports 90 percent of its food. Furthermore, the island’s dependence on fossil fuel imports has a crippling effect on its economy, yet Hawai‘i Island is abundant with natural resources that could move it to greater food and energy self-reliance.

“The students met with creative and energetic island leaders, such as Jerry Konanui, a respected Native Hawaiian community leader and farmer, who presented an overview of the Hawaiian history of food self-reliance. The students went into the world’s rarest forest, the Hawaiian dryland forest at Ka‘upulehu, with Yvonne and Keoki Carter, who linked that forest to the life of the ocean by introducing the students to the *ahupua‘a* [loosely translated as summit-to-sea or watershed] concept for a complete sense of ecosystem health,” Hamabata said.

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The scholars met with leaders from other field research sites including Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park and the Pacific Basin Agricultural Research Center. They also delved into Hawaiian history and culture, tourism and development on the island, geothermal energy, and community actions to protect ecosystems and cultural ties.

Christina Monroe, education project specialist with the East-West Center, said the students found links on Hawai‘i Island “that resonated with their home countries and the issues they face with sustainable agriculture, food security, tourism development, and resulting equity and native cultural impacts.

“The Hawaiian traditional resource management and land ethic based on cultural knowledge were instructive and inspiring to them,” Monroe said. “They see that Hawai‘i holds a special perspective on mainstream American development that can inform their own countries’ development. I think they will be more critical and effective leaders at striking the balance between preserving the inside with integrating the outside—a key to resilient communities, which is an outcome of the institute.”

The participants arrived in Hawai‘i on May 23 to participate in leadership development workshops and obtain an overview of sustainability in the United States through lectures at the East-West Center’s Honolulu campus and field studies including Lyon Arboretum, Hanauma Bay, and sailing on the voyaging canoe *Hokule‘a*. They also participated in a two-day conference with more than 20 local environmental leaders. Their last week was in Washington D.C. with briefings at the Environmental Protection Agency and Senate Committee for Environment and Public Works.

The program’s participants bring a broad range of backgrounds, including study of basic medicine and the effects of climate change on human health; marine biology, water-purification and renewable energy research; and information technology.

Goals of the program include:

- Transformative learning experience through introductions to a broad spectrum of American life.
- Opportunities for U.S. practitioners to learn about environmental challenges in the Asia Pacific region.
- Building networks and collaborative projects that link participants with U.S. environmental professionals to develop practical solutions to shared challenges.

The five-week institute is hosted by the East-West Center with funding from the Study of the U.S. Branch in the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. The Institute is held in collaboration with more than fifty organizations, including the University of

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Hawai'i at Manoa Environmental Center, Yale University's Global Environmental Governance Project, The Nature Conservancy, and The Kohala Center.

For more information on the program, visit www.eastwestcenter.org/education/student-programs/susi-on-global-environmental-issues/.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the U.S. Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options. <http://www.eastwestcenter.org/>

The Kohala Center is an independent, not-for-profit center for research and education *about* and *for* environment. By respectfully engaging Hawai'i Island as the world's most vibrant classroom and laboratory for humanity, The Kohala Center builds teaching and research programs for energy and food self-reliance and ecosystem health to enhance island environments, serve island communities, and advance the work of the academy. The Kohala Center operates in partnership with local, national, and international research and educational institutions. <http://www.kohalacenter.org>

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The Study of the U.S. Institutes are designed and funded by the Study of the U.S. Branch in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). Study of the U.S. Institute participants are among over 40,000 individuals participating in U.S. Department of State exchange programs each year. For more than sixty years, ECA has funded and supported programs that seek to promote mutual understanding and respect between the people of the United States and the people of other countries. Other ECA programs include the Fulbright Program and the Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program. For more information about ECA programs, visit <http://exchanges.state.gov/>.

[photo caption]

John Cusick of the Environmental Center at University of Hawai'i at Manoa describes the formation process of Kilauea Iki Crater in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park to students during a recent U.S. Department of State-sponsored environmental leadership program. Photo by Ramon Lorenzo Luis Guinto.