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Field experience just as important as classroom lessons

By Michael Richards

Last summer, on the rim of Kilauea, I witnessed a moment that traditional classrooms cannot replicate. As towering lava fountains explosively hurled molten rock into the sky, a group of teenagers stood in hushed awe. They weren't just observing geology in action; they were feeling the rumble and literal heat of the Earth. In that moment, a textbook lesson on Hawaiian volcanoes didn't just come alive — it became a personal revelation, the kind of experience that can anchor a young person's identity as a scientist and as a student.

As a director of field-based science programs on Hawaii Island, I have seen these "minds blown" expressions time and again. Classroom teachers lay the vital foundation — the vocabulary, the formulas and the historical context. Field experiences give that foundation meaning. Without the opportunity

to apply knowledge outdoors, students can come to see science as a static collection of facts rather than a living process. Nature is not a distraction from the curriculum; it is the ultimate laboratory for it.

As a community, we need to recognize the field and the classroom as two halves of a whole.

ISLAND VOICES



Michael Richards is executive director of Science Camps of America, a Hawaii-based 501(c)(3) nonprofit offering experiential STEM experiences.

When a student spends a semester reading about marine biology and then spends a morning snorkeling over a coral reef, the transition from "learning" to "understanding" happens in an instant. Immersion turns passive consumers of information into active investigators. They return to their desks with a renewed sense of purpose, seeing their textbooks not as chore lists, but as field guides to the world they've touched with their own hands.

If we want to prepare the next generation for the complexities of the 21st century, this integrated model must become a foundational right. Providing these op-

portunities for all students requires a dual commitment: equity of access and uncompromising conservation.

First, we must bridge the gap that keeps many students from these transformative spaces. Immersive science should not be a luxury reserved for the few. By investing in teachers, scholarships and public-private partnerships, we can ensure that a student's ZIP code does not determine their ability to stand on the rim of a volcano or learn about Polynesian star navigation from the sub-alpine heights of Mauna Kea.

I have watched students from all over Hawaii — and from around the world — stand shoulder-to-shoulder on the same lava



COURTESY MICHAEL RICHARDS

Students witness lava fountaining during an eruption at Kilauea on July 9, 2025.

field, many of whom might never have met without scholarship support. Science is a universal language, and the door to its "living laboratories" must be open to everyone.

Second, we cannot teach science in the field if the "field" no longer exists. Our educational philosophy must be inextricably linked to stewardship. At our Hawaii island programs, we practice strict reef-safe protocols and leave-no-trace ethics because we recognize that these ecosystems are our greatest teachers.

Our community must view our natural landscapes not merely as resources to be extracted or engines of the tourist economy, but as irreplaceable classrooms for our keiki that require our absolute protection. A reef bleached beyond recovery cannot teach a child about symbiosis. A forest overtaken by invasive species cannot teach about native biodiversity. If we lose these spaces, we lose the most powerful tools we have for inspiring the problem-solvers of tomorrow.

When we take students to the "rim" — metaphorically and literally — we give them a profound new perspective on their own potential. We give them a sense of place, a community of peers, and a deep-seated respect for the planet. When we pair the rigor of the classroom with the wonder of the wild, we don't just teach science; we inspire.