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On my recent visit to Maui, a little girl—I'd guess she was about five years old—stopped to show me her pretty new bracelet and necklace. She explained that she made the jewelry from discarded drinking straws and other debris on the sand. Not only had she beautified the beach, she said, but she may have also saved turtles, fish, sea birds, and other marine life from ingesting the trash and dying.

She learned the environmental lesson—as well as how to have fun with it—at the new Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ambassadors of the Environment program at the Ritz-Carlton Kapalua, part of the hotel's newly forged partnership with Jean-Michel Cousteau's nonprofit organization, Ocean Futures Society. Under the guidance of naturalists, children age four and up participate in hands-on activities such as snorkeling near coral reefs, mangrove kayaking, underwater photography, and pontoon expeditions—and, yes, finding creative ways to use trash in the "Marine Debris Through Artistry" class.

Ambassadors of the Environment represents a win-win-win

deal for everyone and every living thing. Kids have fun while learning how to protect and preserve the surrounding land and sea. Parents get kid-free vacation time. Most of all, the animals, plants, land, and sea benefit.

An immediate hit with young guests, the Ritz-Carlton has extended the program to adults, including families, individual guests and corporate groups. Those with just a few hours to spare can take rainforest hikes leading to magnificent vistas of the rolling green hills of Honolua Valley. The trek begins with a traditional Hawaiian chant, during which hikers join hands and naturalist-guide Kefa Naeole asks "permission" to enter nature's "hale" and request protection and enlightenment.

Walkers pass berries that grow without thorns, nettles without nettles, and mint plants with no mint fragrance. Naeole explains that in Maui's isolated island environment, plants evolved without defenses, as they had no predators. (The only native mammals here are monk seals and hoary bats.) But Naeole also points out how invasive, introduced plants are slowly taking over indigenous fauna, and mosquitoes (another non-native species) are killing off birds. "Everything is connected, so if one species goes, another one follows," Naeole explains.

Adult guests and corporate groups can also sign up for naturalist-accompanied snorkeling or whale-watching excursions to Lāna'i, while spotted and swimming dolphins race the boat, ride in its wake, leaping, jumping and frolicking in the surf.

But back to the little girl with the bracelet. While the child and I chatted, the naturalist who had been working with her showed me a plastic bag, filled with plastic gunk – the contents of the stomach of an albatross that perished after eating bits of trash that had been carelessly tossed on the sand. As I stared at that plastic bag, and mourned the innocent chick, the abstract concept of "environment" turned into something concrete, real, accessible and important.

That's the point—and the goal—of the Jean-Michel Cousteau's Ambassadors of the Environment program, says Dr. Richard Murphy, the organization's director of science and education. "There is so much for us to preserve in Hawai'i, but we have already lost so much of our native habitats and species. If I can give people incentive to take some positive baby steps, then I've succeeded in my mission," he says.

www.ritzcarlton.com/en/Properties/KapaluaMaui/AmbassadorsOfTheEnvironment/Default.htm