Every Spring semester, UH Hilo students have the chance to participate in the Break Thru Adventures (BTA) program hosted by the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo Service Learning office. According to BTA’s official website, “Break Thru Adventures is an eco-service program that supports students, staff, and faculty volunteering throughout the Hawaiian Islands in a drug and alcohol-free setting. Students get the opportunity to experience another island’s unique environment and culture through volunteer work... groups of students travel to different islands in the State and serve the local communities in various ways. Typically each site comprises of 12 students including two student coordinators. BTA is an alternative to a traditional spring break vacation. Our program is a service-learning vehicle designed to impact students by offering life-changing experiences.”

This year’s trip was led by two student leaders: Rosie Lee a second year Marine Science major with a Marine Option Program certificate, and Lilly Dorr a third year Business major with a Marine Option Program certificate.

When asked what inspired them to be a leader for this year’s BTA trip Lee shared that, “when thinking about my spring plans for 2016, I knew I didn’t want to repeat last year; sitting in my residence hall eating frozen food and maybe going to the pool once or twice. I try to gear my life to as environmentally conscious as possible. I also wanted to be able to explore other island of Hawaii. Through a friend I heard about BTA and I knew it was the right spring break vacation. Our program is a service-learning vehicle designed to impact students by offering life-changing experiences.”

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While on Kauai, BTA participants had the chance to give back to the ‘āina via preservation projects and volunteering for the local community. "Each location provided its own service project. At Koke‘e we did invasive species removal and ended up removing 6,000 Ginger plants in one day of work - along with the help of fellow volunteers and staff!

“Next we traveled down and across the island to Limahuli where we worked in their botanical gardens to remove invasives, fertilize, and mulch to help restore the ahupua’a back to its native state.

“Lastly we headed next door to Waipa where we helped at poi day and was part of the team that cleaned Kalo for the 1000 pounds of poi made that day. We also did some garden restoration and clean up here as well,” Lee said.

Also because BTA is a sustainability-focused program, BTA participants did not spend their week living in a resort. "For the first three nights of the trip we were spoiled in a nice, but freezing, cabin with beds and full kitchen and restroom facilities. However, after leaving Koke‘e, each location seemed to get a little more ‘earthy’. We camped at Limahuli in tents, but still had full access to a modern kitchen and facilities too. The struggle got real, and more fun, once we got to Waipa and started camping for real.

“With cooled water showers, a port-a-potty, and a camp stove that didn't work for the first night at camp, we got real close to nature...and each other. The first and third night at the waipa campsite, most of us spent the night under the stars directly on the sandy beach with the crabs. The same would have gone for night two, except many of the participants crammed themselves into the rental vehicle to avoid the severe thunder and lightning storm, and flash floods.

“While they bunkered in the car, the rest of us faced a soggy night in the tents and water seeped through the not-so-waterproof tents,” Lee said.
The BTA participants not only gave back to the `aina and lived amongst it, but connected with it as well. "The entire trip was connecting with the `aina. Everything from presenting our oli - E Ho Mai - to getting knee deep in chicken poo and mud as we fertilized the earth was truly and cultural and connecting experience, " Lee said.

Working all day in the land and camping all night may of course pose some challenges for a group of university students, however Lee shared that their biggest challenge was not being away from town.

"Besides the hot, muggy days in the sun, I' d say our biggest challenge as a group was getting through the thunderstorms that encapsulated the entire state. Like I said before, most ran for cover while some faced the soggy tents. However, our biggest fear was getting swept away by the river that was in a flash flood warning sitting 50 feet away from our tents. Every hour at least one person would wake up, hobble through the rain and try and not get swept away by the rising river as we checked on it. Also, not like our sleep wasn't already getting disrupted, but every few hours everyone with an iphone would get an ear-busting alarm as the National Weather Service would update the severe flood warnings."

The long trip, although posing some challenges, was true edVenture for the BTA participants. "The trip really taught me about the terrestrial life of Hawaii. As a Marine Science major, I never really take the time to learn about our land plants. The entire trip was an educational adventure! This trip for me was really a test of character. The first day or two of the trip were really an interesting emotional experience for me. I was having an adventure of a lifetime, but at first it felt like I was experiencing it alone because I wasn't with my original crew [of friends].

"One night while sitting on a cliff edge and watching the sunset, I was able to realize that making new friends is okay. In fact, it's great. After that moment I was really able to enjoy the trip with others because I was no longer afraid to do something without the home crew and not feel like I was leaving them behind. Instead I created friendships that could then become part of my life," Lee said.

“My favorite memory was the last night of the trip. While at our Waipa campsite, we created - well attempted to - a little fire out of the soggy shrubbery. For nearly three hours we all sat around the fire and talked story and ate marshmallows while telling our deep secrets and funniest stories. T'was the night that a group of friends became a family. After the fire we all headed out to the beach with our sleeping bags and plopped down under the stars. The next morning we all rustled awake as the sunrise peared over the horizon and took the morning slow to embrace the last day on the island. One of my favorite things in the world is to watch people become friends. And that was no exception with this crew. It can be seen in our pictures. When we left the big island, we were more or less acquaintances. However, on return, there was no doubt that life long friendships had been formed as a see smiles and laughter across everyone's faces as we repeat the same 10 billion inside jokes over and over," Lee said.

For more information about BTA you can visit their website at http://hilo.hawaii.edu/campuscenter/service/BreakThruAdventures.php. If you would like to learn more about BTA 2017, or become involved, please email breakthruadventures.uhh@gmail.com or standby for the informational meetings which will begin in the Fall semester of 2016.

"Future BTAers: don't be afraid to use a spring break to give back. BTA is a cheap, fun and fulfilling way to spend a spring break. Also, allow yourself to open up to the group. It’s much more satisfying going on an adventure with a crew. Don't let yourself feel alone," Lee said.