



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Research station not 'island getaway'

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Politicians often overlook the benefits of funding the scientific community, instead providing criticism about unnecessary spending.

In a Feb. 16 Daily Bruin article from this year ("Senator aims to cap fee hikes"), Sen. Jeff Denham referred to the Richard B. Gump South Pacific Research Station in Moorea, French Polynesia as a "Tahiti island getaway" and a waste of state money.

Twenty-four UCLA students returned on May 31 from the marine biology quarter, abbreviated MBQ, at the Gump station. The purpose of the program was to provide students with a unique opportunity to learn firsthand the process of conducting marine research. Moorea, located in the South Pacific, is surrounded by coral reefs, allowing students to do research on this rapidly declining marine system.

Having personally participated in this program, we disagree with Denham's statements. A typical day of the MBQ was by no means a "getaway." Students were divided into eight groups of three, with each group developing and conducting their own projects.

These projects often required waking up around sunrise to get out in the field as early as possible. Mornings and afternoons would consist of surveying, working in the lab, setting out and collecting treatments in the field, and analyzing data, often well into the night.

Some may argue that a program somewhere closer would provide similar research experience. Although this may be true, coral reefs are one of the most important areas of inquiry for marine biology, especially with the theory of alternate stable states.

This theory focuses on the relationship between coral and algae – opponents in a competition for light and space. High nutrient levels promote gradual algal growth, while herbivores can quickly graze down the algae and keep it in check. In nutrient rich areas with little herbivory, algae will generally outcompete coral. All eight groups developed projects that somehow looked at relationships between these variables and algal growth.

By creating projects that focus on these ideas, students could produce more meaningful conclusions. The ultimate goal for any researcher is publication in a scientific journal, and because each group got some significant results, many students have a chance at publishing their work.

By participating in the MBQ, students developed a better understanding of coral reef dynamics as well as the threats to their survival. In addition, personal benefits included a chance to work on their own research projects – a first for many students. This type of program is a very rare opportunity for undergraduates; in most cases, students first have a chance to work on their own research projects during their masters or Ph.D.

We strongly believe that the Berkeley research station on Moorea is not a waste of money, nor is it a vacation. It gives students and scientists from across the world an opportunity to gain research experience, and the work done there provides valuable insight on threatened coral reef communities.