

Interview with Tara for Columbia University Publication Spectator

<http://eye.columbiaspectator.com/index.php/site/article/mikaela-bradbury-interviews-tara-deporte/>

NOTE: Some of the information contained in this interview is inaccurate. The reporter did not fact-check before printing.

Mikaela Bradbury Interviews Tara DePorte

Tara DePorte is a prolific environmental activist and artist. She currently sits on the Board of Directors at the Lower East Side Ecology Center. As an undergraduate at the University of Virginia and a graduate student pursuing her Masters in Climate and Society at Columbia University, the bulk of Deporte's academic scholarship and subsequent work (with the United Nations Development Programme, among other organizations) has focused on allocation of water resources, particularly in developing countries. Today, she focuses her efforts on the urban environment, spearheading a number of environmental initiatives in Manhattan, one of which is composting. The Eye met with her to discuss her composting initiatives.

How did you zero in on composting as your main targeting area?

Well, our organization is 20 years old ... The directors of the organization were living in the East Village and started composting in our community garden at Seventh between B and C and started some wind rows—big long half-circle piles that you put compost in. We had a massive space then. Since then we've started working with the Department of Park and Recreation and have started doing large-scale composting with them. And it's just continued to grow from there and now we work with the Department of Sanitation and are the official head of the Manhattan Compost Project and Urban Compost Project. Every other borough does it through their botanical gardens.

Are there movements towards a large citywide composting system?

There are a lot of people that would support that, but as far as I know, that's not on the city agenda ... but I'm hoping it will be possible. Sustainability is on everyone's minds.

Are a lot of your participants residents, or are you mostly working with larger urban groups?

The urban project is about being an information source—a localized borough information source on composting with a lot focused on education and outreach—but our own composting facilities don't have anything to do with that project anymore. Rather, we have a drop-off in Union Square at the farmers market.

Do you see composting as a niche field? What do you see as the barrier to citywide composting?

A lot of the same issues as recycling translate over to composting. Education is massive—people don't know what they can put in and a lot of buildings will get frustrated because they will separate their recycling but then the staff will go and contaminate it. A few years ago, I visited some facilities and they literally had people handpicking stuff out.

On a larger scale, what do you think the breaking point is for people to start changing their habits? Some think that we need to reach a certain level of so-called "risk society," or that environmentalism needs to go hand-in-hand with capitalism, become profitable, and then it will become mainstream. What are your views on this?

Personally, whenever I'm talking about taking action on environmental issues I try to appeal to people's personal lives. We all have things in our life that take priority—your personal well-being, family, friends, things that are closest to you that triumph. So instead of deep-ecology philosophy, I appeal to, like: you have kids. Well, we have some of the highest asthma rates in the city. And what is some of the major trucking going on? Garbage trucks. So trying to not frame it as "environmental," which is often thought of as "other" ... trying to make it so...

It's more practical, matter-of-fact?

Yeah, realize who you're talking to and that it's hard to change your habits. We as environmentalists have to be adaptable and give a variety of options.

How does this apply to developing countries? I know you've done work in Brazil. So, how do you weigh on the debate around developing countries and their right to industrialize at the expense of the environment?

Well, that's a really difficult question. I believe more in showing the well-roundedness of the options. Environmentalism doesn't have to be about that. It can be about economic incentives and a lot of major corporations are showing that. The hard part is that a lot of time when it's developing countries versus industrialized ones, we have massive amounts of raw natural resources and then you have processing and extraction coming from other countries. I like to focus on what we can do in our own lives before we go on to what other people can do in their lives. If you tell someone what to do, they probably won't do it.

I definitely agree. I know recycling has a lot of controversies around energy use during processing. Does composting have any of the same controversies?

Well, on a citywide scale, energy is used in trucking, design, location ... you don't have white rich people next to facilities. And composting can release some anaerobic bacteria, but just like anything else, you can have systems to capture that. Composting is basically rotting like anything else—it depends on whether you are capturing it and using the finished product. You can actually have more

control. It's especially important in NYC, where we need better soil and in order to make better soil you add good organic materials. I'm sure people could find other issues with it.

You made me think of William McDonough's work Cradle to Cradle, and the creation of industrial products that can be processes like organic material... He was my Professor at UVA!

So what do you think of the role of technology versus going back to the past? I shy away from going back to the past and idealizing indigenous communities because there is great stereotype with those type of things.

How do you recommend a college student become involved in your work? We have tons of programs. For one, we can start with composting. Our workshops are free. Since it's Columbia and you are in Manhattan, it's perfect. We can set up workshops to get students to get more worm bins in their dorm rooms. They're only \$10 each. And then there's the drop off in Union Square. There are also tons of stewardship programs, climate change programs, internships, environmental leadership programs, a lot of volunteer days in the park and recycling events—electronics recycling ... I know someone contacted us about that. It's strange, you teach a composting workshop and there is so much passion.

Perhaps because it's a nexus of so many issues.

Yeah, there are so many symbols of what it can mean. Tons of people in boroughs used to compost growing up. Now, all our classes are full. I feel like a lot of people are starting to do it and starting to care.