

FRONTIER PSYCHIATRIST

Impact Woman: An Interview with Tara DePorte



Tara DePorte (Photo: Lucien Samaha)

BY KEITH MEATTO

Tara DePorte has been an Eco Geek since she founded her elementary school's first environmental club. Now, she's working to protect the environment on a local, national, and global level: caring for trees with disabled adults in her Brooklyn neighborhood; campaigning city business owners to save energy; working with locals in Latin America, Europe, and Africa; and rubbing elbows with Al Gore, Ban Ki Moon, and Rene Zellweger. Tonight, in honor of [World Environment Day](#), her non-profit organization, [Human Impacts Institute](#), is hosting a public symposium at the German Consulate with Germany's Energy Secretary, the founder of 350.org, and others to discuss how to address the ongoing climate crisis. HII has also frequented this week's Green Screens environmental film festival at Lincoln Center, where I enjoyed [Blackfish](#) and [The Last Ocean](#). The following is an edited version of an email exchange I had with Tara, whom I have known socially for three years, about environmental activism, her passion for TED talks and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and what we all can do not merely to "save the planet" but to live healthier, happier lives.

Frontier Psychiatrist: It was recently announced that the level of CO2 in the atmosphere has reached 400 PPM. What does this mean?

Tara DePorte: The earth's climate system is so complex and not completely understood by even our most top climate scientists This question is akin asking someone on the street, so if I eat 5,000 hamburgers tomorrow, please explain exactly what will happen to my circulatory, respiratory, lymphatic, and every other bodily system? The short answer: um, we know it won't be good.

FP: What should people know about the state of the environment in 2013?

TD: One of our big mistakes has been to talk about “saving our planet” as opposed to “living healthy, happy lives”. I’m going to go out on a limb and say that most people on this planet would love to have themselves and their loved ones be healthy and happy—and the vast majority of us would put that as #1 on our priority lists. However, we’ve fostered a divide between nature and humans, environment and society. In order to really think about the “state of the environment”, the first step is to look at the “state of OUR environment”—from the trash on the street corner to the rates of asthma in our kids and the amount of cancer in our communities. What type of world do I want? I want my apple to be affordable AND to not have hazardous toxins on it; I want access to clean drinking water AND I want my friends in Brazil to have it too; I want city kids to know that ketchup is actually made from tomatoes that GROW in the dirt; and country kids to know that having good public transportation can mean an incredible amount of freedom. I would love every American, and every global citizen to ask two questions: Are you proud of your human impacts? And if not, what actions are you going to take to support strong communities and our healthy environment?

FP: What are the top three obstacles to meaningful environmental change?

1. **Fear of change.** Pure and simple.
2. **Hypocrisy.** Non-industrialized countries have a big bone to pick with countries like the U.S. and those in the European Union. They look at the current CO2 levels, pollution, and environmental impacts that they are dealing with and the economic and social benefits that our countries have reaped through industrialization and natural resource exploitation. Understandably, they’re not too happy with the not-too-hidden hypocrisy..
3. **Polarization and politicization.** I am continuously surprised and annoyed by how “political” and “controversial” environmental issues are in the U.S. It just doesn’t make sense. We literally learn in kindergarten that EVERY LIVING BEING on this planet Earth we call home needs AIR, WATER, FOOD, and SHELTER to survive. And there’s no negotiating on this deal. It’s truly something that we ALL have in common. So, why is our Congress divided along party lines about environmental issues? Why do many people adamantly oppose policy or programs that promote clean air, water, and food? And why aren’t these issues the TOP issues of our lives if we know that they involve our most basic human needs?

FP: How did you get involved in environmental advocacy?

TD: I think I was born an environmentalist and an artist. In fourth grade I started our school’s first environmental club—which consisted of me and three of my friends and everyone paid dues, which we sent to Greenpeace, and I wrote our first letter to our Congressman, which I would summarize as, “we need to save the planet.” He sent back a handwritten letter congratulating us for our commitment to the earth and the latest copy of *State of the Planet*. These young actions also reflected in my fashion choices, which consisted of an unusually high number of “Save the Bay” and “Love Mother Earth” t-shirts, dolphin necklaces and Indiana Jones-esque khaki shorts. Growing up near Washington D.C., I was also lucky to have access to major protests and events, especially during the 80’s when Earth Day meant celebrities like Tom Cruise (with an amazing blonde bleach job) spoke to tens of thousands of people on the Washington Mall about the importance of protecting our world. In seventh grade, my environmental science teacher, Ms. Beery shared a quote from Chief Seattle “The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth. Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.” The simple, poignant beauty of these words helped me voice my feelings of connection and responsibility. Later, I was lucky to attend a magnet high school for science and technology and to have crazy experiences such as running DNA electrophoresis models in the lab, grafting plant species in the greenhouse, and almost convincing my biology teacher that we should dissect a cadaver. As a teen, I worked at an eco-adventure summer camp along the banks of the Potomac River. There I started really seeing the importance of experience-as-learning, when it came to building connections between people and their natural environment; by holding lizards, people started to care about the health of their habitat—by climbing rocks, kids saw how nature could be fun and stimulating. Later, at the

University of Virginia, I realized that there wasn't an existing major for me, so I proposed my own: a combination of courses from Biology, Environmental Sciences, and Anthropology and, after much deliberation, mentoring, and personal angst, I called it *Human Impacts on Ecosystems*, a name that would certainly play a major role in my life in later years

FP: How did the Human Impacts Institute start?

TD: After college I moved to NYC, which many thought was an odd choice for my interest in environmental work. My theory: it's easy to be an "environmentalist" in a pristine, gorgeous location like a National Park. However, I see a real gap in the ability and willingness for us to connect culture/society and nature, particularly in our cities where we think: "nature, what nature?"

My first job out of college was as Director of Environmental Education for a local environmental non-profit, the Lower East Side Ecology Center, where I was amazingly given the freedom to develop and implement, from scratch, the education programs. Nine years later, I had led hands-on environmental education programs for tens-of-thousands of New Yorkers, gotten my master's in Climate Science and Policy from Columbia University, joined Al Gore's *Climate Reality*, developed a training for grassroots women environmental leaders to join U.N. negotiations, begun developing international climate policy, and became an Adjunct Professor at Webster University in the Netherlands. In 2010, I started to think of how I could connect the different components of my life to create community around education, creativity, direct action, big policy, and the environment. I realized I was growing as an educator, artist and environmentalist, but that I could only have but so much of an impact as one individual. In building an organization, I could work to foster a community that would take a "big picture" approach to personalizing environmental issues and inspiring action through hands-on education, collaboration, and true creativity. That's when HII was born.

FP: You've been to more than 20 countries both for work and pleasure. How have your travels influenced your outlook?

TD: In my travels, I'm continuously reminded of both the similarities and differences we share as a global community. In Haiti, I was reminded of the brutality of poverty and the reality of day-to-day survival that many face in the world. My work with rural women in South Africa reminded me of the personal safety issues and violence that so many women and girls face around accessing the things we take for granted as "givens" in our—clean water and energy. Working in Costa Rica with women entrepreneurs, the ingenuity and innovation of the human spirit and the power of hope and vision really hit home. Researching for the UNDP in Bogota, I was exposed to the role financial mechanisms can play in conserving and "managing" nature. Doing field work on participatory water management in Brazil, I saw the vehemence and utter passion of community members around the topic. Finally, in collaborating with our international partners—from the Netherlands to Kenya—I am consistently reminded that there are truly countless ways to view, and treat, our environment and each other.

FP: Who are some of your mentors, heroes, and role models?

TD: I have had so many sources of inspiration and awe everyone from fearless performers like Karen O of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs to the great minds behind TED talks, to former teachers of mine like Dr. Fred Diehl who always pushed me to strive for more and dig deeper. During a women's fellowship program in Mexico I met Gemma Bulos, who was, at the time, spreading the word of water issues through her beautiful voice and song with her organization A Single Drop. She now directs the [Global Women's Water Initiative](#) and is consistently inspiring tangible, focused action of increasing communities access to clean water. Another group of heroes are the co-founders and leaders at 350.org, a young, global climate movement. Having partnered with 350 here in New York, nationally and internationally, I'm a big fan of their creative approaches to movement building and tireless focus on combatting climate change. Their targeted approach to environmentalism is also inspirational as it's very different to my more generalist approach—and their sheer ability to bring in audiences and inspire action is truly powerful.

With the Climate Reality Project, I was trained—with 200 other Americans—by Al Gore to do educational presentations about climate change in my community. I was asked to do three of these panels in 24-hours: two were moderated by Rene Zellweiger and my final one was with Vice President Gore. I can honestly say that day included some of the most amazing eco-geek out moments I've ever had in my life. I met countless top climate scientists, celebrities, world-changing activists, and truly inspirational people. It was a humbling experience and I loved being on the panels with such distinguished, knowledgeable people.

FP: You're a painter and a dancer. Is that related to your environmental work?

TD: I have never made “environmental art,” instead painting images about my relationships and non-eco life. But lately I've been pushing myself to use my art to communicate environmental issues. This has resulted in a couple of performance pieces in New York: [the Albedo Effect](#) and Continual (Re)Growth ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)) and working with my colleagues at HII for the [Human Impacts Climate Carnival in 2012](#). Another thing I am consistently reminding myself is that the Human Impacts Institute IS creative.

FP: Can you make a living being an environmental activist?

TD: Over the past two years, I've been able to pay myself for about one sixth of the time I spend on HII, if that. Amazingly, many of my colleagues continue to work without an income. But that isn't something that we can sustain, or that I would want us to sustain over the long-term. My grumpy self likes to talk about how backwards it is that we live in a world where people like me and my colleagues—who spend most of their time giving back to the community—also have to have a fulltime job of begging for money. My utopian world would be where we attribute the greatest societal value to professions that truly lead to a healthy society and that we don't expect them to both “do good” and “barely get by”.

FP: What books, articles, or films about the environment do you recommend?

- [What's Mine Is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption](#) by Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers:
- [No Impact Man: The Adventures of a Guilty Liberal Who Attempts to Save the Planet, and the Discoveries He Makes About Himself and Our Way of Life in the Process](#) by Colin Beaven
- [Orion Magazine](#)
- [Global Warming's Terrifying New Math](#) by Bill McKibben
- [Baraka The Girl Who Silenced the World for 5 minutes:](#)
- [How a Country With One of the World's Largest Economies Is Ditching Fossil Fuels](#)
- [Why Aren't Americans Heads Over Heels for Our Environment?](#)

FP: What can the average citizen do to help the environment?

TD: Get involved. I know we all have busy lives, many priorities, and often limited resources, but that's why groups like ours exist—to help give you tools to make healthy choices. I love the simplicity of LESS is MORE. You can start spending LESS MONEY today and also help reduce your negative human impacts on our communities. Buying less products—from beauty to cleaning to technology to food—really is key to conserving resources, reducing, waste, and limiting emissions. And when you do purchase products—consider that EVERY DOLLAR YOU SPEND is a vote, a vote for the company you're purchasing from and a show of support for their environmental and social impacts. So, making a decision to be an informed consumer (which can be a very daunting task in itself), is key.

Keith Meatto is Editor in Chief of Frontier Psychiatrist. He recently reviewed [Blackfish](#) and [The Last Ocean](#), two documentary films at Lincoln Center's Green Screens festival, and wrote about the [future of soccer in New York](#). He agrees that in nearly all aspects of life, less is more.