

# State of the Planet

## EDUCATION

### The Recycling Partnership: a Speaker Series Talk on Improving Recycling Practices

BY CAROLINE HORRIGAN | FEBRUARY 19, 2021

On January 29, the [Undergraduate Program in Sustainable Development](#) welcomed Asami Tanimoto, an alumna of the Earth Institute's graduate program in Sustainability Management, for its first [Speaker Series](#) talk of the spring 2021 semester. Before starting at Columbia, Tanimoto received her undergraduate and graduate degrees in chemical engineering from Tufts University and then worked in environmental consulting at CDM Smith for almost a decade. Tanimoto realized her passion for waste diversion and resource conservation while in the sustainability management program, which eventually led her to her current position as a community program manager at the Recycling Partnership.



Photo: [Aleksandar Pasaric](#) from Pexels

The Recycling Partnership is a national nonprofit that works together with communities and companies to improve recycling practices. Their mission includes expanding access to residential recycling, increasing capture of recyclables, and improving the quality of the recyclables in question. Since being founded in 2014, the organization has developed relationships with stakeholders spanning the entirety of the material supply chain — meaning the companies and organizations that make products, sell products, collect the recycling, and enact the recycling — creating the most organized recycling partnership in the U.S. This unique position within communities allows the Recycling Partnership to prioritize four main action points: transforming residential recycling, advancing circularity for packaging, accelerating recycling policies, and leveraging data in a way that it never has been before.

When it was founded, the Recycling Partnership's work tended to focus on the East Coast. Although it might seem like a logical next step to expand nationwide, there was a major obstacle to overcome, since there are already a lot of established recycling programs on the West Coast, and initially it wasn't clear whether these states wanted the help. Tanimoto, who now lives in Oregon, led the Recycling Partnership's West Coast Contamination Initiative, which focused on understanding recycling improvement needs in California, Oregon, and Washington. As part of the initiative, Tanimoto spent almost a year meeting with communities and other stakeholders in order to hear about the recycling issues they were looking to overcome. Now she works with communities, mainly on the West Coast, to improve their recycling programs through education campaigns.

Difficulties with standardizing nationwide recycling practices stem from the varied origins of recycling programs. Recycling services began as an addendum to cities' solid waste programs that are used to tackle sanitation issues. These programs vary between cities, because of the different priorities, infrastructure, and funding for the sanitation projects. Although the Recycling Partnership tries to establish regional or statewide grant projects, they are still constrained by the same variations that initially individualized the programs. Each city might have different demand for recyclables or different access to material recycling facilities depending on contracts, and therefore have different lists of what can be recycled even within the same region. As of right now, the Recycling Partnership is trying to encourage harmonization in how recycling is discussed as a first step.

A large part of the organization's work is to convince the recycling industry that it is not just about recycling infrastructure but about encouraging people to want to do better. This people-minded outlook is reflected within the company as well. Their employees come from all backgrounds and all espouse the organization's core values in their daily lives. In the past year, the Recycling Partnership has rededicated itself to reflect equity, inclusion, and diversity in their training and in their work. It is this sort of mentality that has led the Partnership to create the Recycling Inclusion Fund, which works on improving access to recycling and creating a pipeline of leadership opportunities for people of all races and ethnicities.

Tanimoto credits the Earth Institute's Sustainability Management program with a lot of her development in the sustainability field. While working in consulting, she had found that there were very few projects where clients were looking to surpass the requirements that were mandated by law. Her coursework, specifically Introduction to Finance and Circular Economy for Sustainable Professionals, filled in gaps in her knowledge and gave her both a well-rounded understanding of sustainability and a confidence in the work she does now. Tanimoto mentions that the highlight of being a student was networking with current and former students, learning from professionals in the field, and having opportunities like [EDF Climate Corps](#) and [Net Impact](#), which she credits for leading her to the Recycling Partnership.

Regardless of educational background, the Recycling Partnership looks to hire people who are passionate about the work. Even without engaging in the organization itself, emulating its core values is important for the sake of the planet. Asami Tanimoto embodies this idea fully, and is eager to encourage others to do the same. She is always glad to talk to anyone interested in more information about ways to get involved in the Recycling Partnership or with recycling in general.

*Caroline Horrigan is an intern for the Office of Academic and Research Programs at the Earth Institute, Columbia University. She is an M.S. candidate at the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, Columbia University.*

*Columbia's [Undergraduate Program in Sustainable Development](#) hosts the Speaker Series every semester to provide opportunities for students to explore professional development related to sustainability and the environment. To learn more about the program, please visit our [website](#) or contact Program Manager Cari Shimkus at [cshimkus@ei.columbia.edu](mailto:cshimkus@ei.columbia.edu).*

---

✉ Subscribe ▼

Login



*Be the First to Comment!*

**B** *I* U       

0 COMMENTS

