



Tishman Environment
and Design Center



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Interview with EPSM Alum Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson '17 is an Environmental Policy and Sustainability Management Program Alum, who currently works as the Climate and Sustainability Initiative Manager at the [Madison Square Park Conservancy](#).



What interested you in the Environmental Policy and Sustainability Management program at Milano?

I went to undergraduate school for politics and upon graduation, I was working in the local mayor's office. But I did not get the sense of things actually getting done. Meanwhile, I knew I needed to be in a position where things are more positive and change actually happens. I did not feel like my politics degree set me up for that type of work, so I started looking at graduate programs. I knew I wanted to do work in the environmental field because in my undergrad, I worked closely with the school's sustainability coordinator and it seemed like the kind of job I would love to have.

The New School lined up with my new professional interests and Milano really stood out for the ability to choose policy or management concentrations

What was your journey from graduate school to arriving at your current position with the Madison Square Park Conservancy?

When I started at The New School, I was working part-time for the GrowNYC's Youthmarket, which shifted my whole focus towards the food systems management. We created our own curriculum based on the students' main interests in food systems-related topics. Then we would go out into communities and teach about sustainable farming and food systems, as well as do some management work and metrics for the market.

In my second year, I got an internship with an architecture group, working on Zero-Waste guidelines through the city. So myself and an architecture student went into buildings and researched the flow of waste, held some focus groups. Our research was then used to redesign a more sustainable system. There, I met one of the zero-waste consultants of the project, The Foodprint Group, and started working with them as a freelancer, helping out with waste audits and some office work. I stayed close to them and learned so much.

I also learned so much from my capstone project. I worked with the Brooklyn Brewery on how to incorporate anaerobic digestion to

manage their waste. It was not the project I signed up on originally so I have definitely had to learn to adapt. I talked to a lot of community gardeners to see how they could use the digested products, connected with [Sure We Can](#), interviewed a brewery that already used anaerobic digestion. So, I ended up making a lot of great connections and learning so much in the process.

Coming on as the Sustainability Manager at the Madison Square Park Conservancy has brought all of my past experience full circle. The biggest area we are focused on right now is waste, so everything I have learned has been coming up again.

Madison Square Park Conservancy just recently started a sustainability department. My colleague and I are spearheading it, which can obviously be very challenging in the early stages, but we are constantly learning a lot.

What are some initiatives that you're currently working on implementing (or already have) that you're most excited about?

We had a moment of inspiration at lunchtime, which is when the park fills up with disposable cups and service ware, and compostable bowls from all the different corporate vendors around the park. Besides addressing the waste issue, we also

saw an opportunity of promoting a plant-rich diet, which more and more vendors are coming on board with. So we wondered how can we really make that push, even if it is just in this neighborhood to start with.

Now, we are looking to engage the neighborhood residents; potentially through lunch and learns, to get them to think about their waste output and how they could reduce it, starting with doing it at home but also making the best decisions whenever you eat out.

Ultimately though, the first step is working with the restaurants to get them to offer more sustainable options. We start by suggesting they do a waste audit, see where most of the waste is coming from, and then help them find potential alternatives for waste reduction. I think it is so important that businesses make waste reduction as easy as possible for the customers while educating them to switch from [using] disposable items. So, we are at the very early stages of working towards that.

We have also started making a lot of changes within the park to make sure that we are “walking the walk”. We are looking at how we process land management, using the best tools with the least emissions, using the best lighting, and potentially, finding ways to source from wind

and solar. At this stage, it is mostly about auditing our current impacts, while thinking about what kind of replacements and improvements we could make.



Madison Square Garden (Source: NYC Parks)

What do you think are the biggest challenges of working in the sustainability arena in the City?

I think something I would really love to see happen is a sense of a shared community in NYC. We are so close-knit and are sharing so many services, like public transportation, that it is quite strange that we have not been able to adapt to this sharing culture. It could start with [something] as simple as reusing the cups and the bowls at your go-to lunch spot. There is a strong mindset that if you are getting takeout, you can only get it from a disposable container, so we have a long way to go in terms of behavioral change.

I think that there needs to be something done to show that New Yorkers are already doing a pretty good job of making sound environmental choices and having a pretty small carbon footprint because I think we could really benefit from some positive reinforcement.

Do you have any 'tips and tricks' for current students who want to pursue a career in sustainability?

I think the most important thing is staying connected with your network, learning from your classmates, and seeing what people a couple of years ahead of you are doing. Also, volunteering and taking on any part-time jobs in your area of interest is very helpful, because, in the end, the sustainability world is rather small in NY and you will keep hearing the same names keep come up, so starting to build these connections early on is so important.

