Transcript for "Ayako Ota, a Japanese meteorologist in Los Angeles, CA"

Clear Skies Ahead: Conversations About Careers in Meteorology and Beyond

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Kelly Savoie:

Hello, Clear Skies Ahead listeners. This is Kelly Savoie, and I'm hoping you can take a moment of your time to rate and review our show wherever you listen to podcasts. We have produced over 60 episodes and you can help us reach even more individuals that will benefit from the diverse experiences shared by our guests. Thanks so much for listening, and I hope you enjoy this new episode.

Welcome to the American Meteorological Society's podcast series, Clear Skies Ahead: Conversations about Careers in Meteorology and Beyond. I'm Kelly Savoie, and I'm here with Emma Collins, and we'll be your hosts. We're excited to give you the opportunity to step into the shoes of an expert working in weather, water, and climate sciences.

Emma Collins:

We're happy to introduce today's guest, Ayako Ota, a Japanese meteorologist in Los Angeles, California. Welcome, Ayako. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Ayako Ota:

Thanks so much for having me, I'm so excited to be here.

Kelly Savoie:

Could you tell us a little bit about what sparked your interest in meteorology and how it influenced your educational path?

Ayako Ota:

It took me quite a long time to go from when I first became interested in meteorology, to when I actually entered the field. Rain has always fascinated me since I was a child, but meteorology only caught my attention in middle school. When I learned about warm and cold fronts and began to understand how rain falls and the mechanisms behind it, I was fascinated. My first thought was, wow, meteorology is so interesting.

Regarding how it influenced my educational path, in Japan, we have a national certification called the Weather Forecaster License, which is legally required to work in forecasting roles. Although I took courses in weather-related fields at university, I primarily studied meteorology at a specialized school to get this certification. At the time, I had other interests, so I hadn't fully decided to pursue meteorology as a career.

Additionally, in Japan, the university's name can sometimes carry more weight than what we study, so I felt this path suited me well. Only 5% of candidates passed this certification, so studying for it requires significant effort and time. Through my efforts, I was able to obtain this certification in 2010, while I was still attending the university.

Kelly Savoie:

The test you took, how long did it take you to study?

Ayako Ota:

It took me about two years.

Kelly Savoie:

Oh, wow!

Ayako Ota:

Yeah. The exam covers a wide range of topics, including the structure of the atmosphere, the Meteorological Services Act, and numerical weather prediction. The exam consists of multiple choice questions as well as written sections where you must explain the reasons behind various weather phenomena.

Kelly Savoie:

Wow! Pretty in-depth.

Emma Collins:

And what opportunities did you pursue when you were in school and out of school that you knew would be beneficial to gaining a job as a meteorologist in Japan?

Ayako Ota:

Oh, it didn't directly help me get a job, but having the chance to talk with as many senior professionals as I could was incredibly valuable. I obtained my Weather Forecaster Certification while still a student, which was uncommon at the time and made it challenging to find peers my age. However, I was able to connect with students from other universities who shared my passion for meteorology.

In fact, I became one of the founding members of the student chapter of the Japan Weather Forecaster Society. We had a little knowledge about meteorology career then, so visiting an aviation weather service center on a remote island and speaking with a staff was a valuable experience. Through these communities, I also participated in study sessions and networked with meteorological professionals.

Kelly Savoie:

So what was your first job in the field and how did your career progress?

Ayako Ota:

To be honest, I didn't start working in meteorology right after graduating from university. It's a bit of a long story though. In 2011, during that time I was deciding my post-graduation path, the Great East Japan earthquake with a magnitude of 9.0 struck. This disaster made me reconsider my future, and I wanted to help restore the lives of people who had lost their normal everyday routines.

This realization led me to join an insurance company. After joining the insurance company, I worked in claims handling insurance payments for those affected by accidents or natural disasters. When it snowed, there was an increase in traffic accidents. And I would hear daily from people who suffered

unexpected damage from typhoons or heavy rains. It also felt like weather forecasts were not being fully utilized in people's everyday lives.

Since I already had a background in weather science, I was shocked to see how underutilized weather forecasts were in practical situations. Additionally, every year somewhere in Japan, major natural disasters occur. After about four years, I felt completely overwhelmed and questioned, how long will this go on? I started to feel a strong desire to reduce the number of people affected by natural disasters by directly communicating weather forecasts myself.

That's when I finally decided to pursue a career in broadcast meteorology. Looking back, it seems pretty crazy. I had no experience working at a weather service company or as a weathercaster. My initial goal was to learn the basics of disaster reporting at NHK, Japan's National Public Broadcasting organization, and I was fortunate enough to become a broadcast meteorologist at one of its regional stations in Matsuyama.

I didn't do well at the audition. Thinking back on it still makes me embarrassed, but I imagine that my passion for wanting to reduce the number of people affected by natural disasters came through.

Kelly Savoie:

Yeah, I bet It was tough without any experience because they have, what is it, the green wall where you have to point to things and it's like the opposite and confusing. Well, I mean, I'm sure they knew that you were learning, but you had a passion for the extreme weather, so I'm glad it worked out.

Ayako Ota:

Yes. I enrolled in a training school like kind of agent for broadcast meteorologists to learn how to project my voice, explain whether charts and arrange graphics on the screen to effectively convey information to viewers. And after in those early days, I experienced the major turning points in my career, which was a heavy rainfall in Western Japan in 2018.

I provided emergency weather reports and repeatedly urged viewers to evacuate throughout the night. Unfortunately, more than 30 people in that prefecture lost their lives and I felt responsible. However, I also realized the importance of raising awareness and promoting the use of disaster weather information. Disasters occurred and some lives were lost in situations where no evacuation order had been issued by the local authorities.

While medicals for evacuation are very important, they alone are not enough to reduce fatalities to zero. To protect lives, people must actively use disaster weather information rather than passively receiving it. I believe that for everyone to be able to use it effectively in the future, people need to become familiar with it from a young age. After working in Matsuyama for two years, I moved to a larger television station in my hometown of Nagoya in 2019.

With the experience of the heavy rainfall in Western Japan in mind, I felt the need to further improve public knowledge of weather and disaster prevention, which allowed me to take on writing projects in addition to my work in broadcasting. Following four and a half years in Nagoya, I moved to LA one year ago due to my husband's job. It was a difficult decision to leave my position, but I believe the experiences I've had here will benefit me in the future. I've continued my writing activities in the US, and together with my esteemed mentor, published a book in Japanese in May.

Emma Collins:

Your experience sounds like it's going to be very helpful even here in California. Is weather information communicated differently in Japan than it is in the US as far as disaster prevention is concerned? And if it is, can you talk about some of the differences between Japan and the US?

Ayako Ota:

Yes, I believe so. As for hurricane coverage in the US, there are sometimes live reports done in the middle of stormy conditions. In Japan, however, there have been fewer reports from dangerous locations in recent years and more reports are done from safe places like inside the buildings. The media also emphasizes the importance of staying inside and not going outside to check the weather by saying, "We are reporting from a safe location." Can you imagine that?

Emma Collins:

I can't. I can't imagine going out in those storms.

Ayako Ota:

But don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to say which is better or worse. I believe there is a proper way to convey weather information, and it depends on the specific region or country.

Kelly Savoie:

Of course. You had mentioned previously that they don't have very good communication for evacuations in Japan. Why do you think that is? Is it because the people in charge don't have enough data about the weather event to know it's important to evacuate?

Ayako Ota:

I think people realize local authorities or JMA, Japan Meteorological Agency, so I think it's not enough to protect lives.

Kelly Savoie:

What are the most common extreme weather events in Japan?

Ayako Ota:

It's hard to pick just one. We have heavy rain, typhoons, extreme heat, all come to mind. For heavy rain, we are seeing unprecedented levels more than often. In fact, localized heavy rain has more than doubled over the past 45 years. Most of the intense rainfall in June and July during the rainy season happens because of quasi-stationary convective events known in Japan as a dangerous phenomenon that can cause severe disasters.

In recent years, JMA has focused on predicting this phenomenon. And for the past two years, they have issued advanced information whenever a quasi-stationary convective event is likely to form. When it comes to typhoons, the ones that approached Japan are getting stronger and sticking around longer. Typhoon Hagibis in 2019, which hit eastern Japan, brought torrential rain that tragically led to over 90 deaths.

In Hakone Kanagawa Prefecture, over 36 inches of rain fell in a single day, setting a new record now for the highest daily rainfall ever recorded at any observation points in Japan. Extreme heat is also a big

concern. Days over 100 degrees Fahrenheit in midsummer are not as rare as they used to be, making it dangerous to be outdoors. This summer was especially intense with a record number of people taken to hospitals for heat stroke since tracking began in 2008. Kids can't even safely play outside during the day on summer vacation anymore.

Emma Collins:

We've been getting some really high heat in the summer in the US as well, which living in California, I'm sure you've noticed. What are some of the benefits and challenges making the transition from Japan to the US?

Ayako Ota:

Well, there's many pros. When it comes to science, I'm impressed by how accessible it is to children in their everyday lives. It's not just meteorology, but also resources like science fairs and museums and fields like astronomy, dinosaurs, nature, and medicine. When I listen to other podcast guests, I noticed that many of them developed an interest in meteorology at a young age and pursued that path early on, which I think may be influenced by the environment they grew up in.

Building logical thinking skills early on will help children act independently in their future without being swayed by rumors or misinformation. I hope that children in Japan will also have more opportunities to engage in science. Being here has given me a new goal, not only to help project lives, but also to share my fascination with science with children in Japan.

Kelly Savoie:

That's a perfect segue because we know that you engage with the public and young students through community lectures in Japan. And how did you seek out those opportunities?

Ayako Ota:

As I mentioned earlier, after working in Matsuyama for a while, I began to question why are people losing their lives even when no evacuation orders have been issued and why can't evacuation orders be issued more promptly? Around that time, about six or seven years ago, I found out that JMA was starting a new weather and disaster prevention advisor program, so I applied immediately.

I took the course, which is aimed at weather forecasters who want to deepen their knowledge of disaster prevention, and it was exactly where I needed to learn more about regarding these critical issues. There was a program I learned that municipalities must take certain steps before issuing evacuation orders, like setting up evacuation shelters in advance and obtaining approval from the mayor.

These processes sometimes can't keep pace with the rapidly worsening weather conditions. Since JMA encourages local governments to make use of this expertise, I sometimes receive direct requests from municipalities for lectures. Speaking directly with people revealed so much. Things that might seem obvious to us can be surprising or unfamiliar to the general public. Hearing their interests and concerns is invaluable and often inspires ideas for my next writing projects.

Emma Collins:

Do you have any tips or advice for international students or recent graduates interested in pursuing careers in weather and climate in the US?

Ayako Ota:

I'd definitely recommend listening to this AMS podcast.

Emma Collins:

That's a great recommendation.

Ayako Ota:

If I had heard something like this when I was younger, it might have inspired me to set bigger dreams. It features detailed stories from professionals in weather and related fields, offering valuable insights into various career paths and experiences. I'm determined to introduce this podcast to Japanese, but it's a useful podcast no matter where you are in the world.

Additionally, this is advice for adults aspiring to enter broadcast, but I think it's crucial to reflect on your past experiences and fully understand why you want to become a broadcast meteorologist and what message you want to convey. This is important not only for passing auditions and interviews, but also for maintaining your motivation through the hard work that lies ahead.

Kelly Savoie:

Well, we're so grateful for everything you've told us about your career. However, before you go, we always ask our guests one last fun question at the end of our show. I'd like to ask what your favorite hobby is.

Ayako Ota:

I love that question. I have two main hobbies. The first one, which I started about 10 years ago, is collecting seasonal chopstick rests. In Japan, it's common to use chopsticks during meals, and we always use chopstick rests because it's considered bad manners to place chopsticks directly on the dishes. Japan has all four seasons. And by choosing chopstick rests that match the season like cherry blossoms in spring, watermelon in summer, autumn leaves in fall, and snowmen in winter, you can make the dining experience more enjoyable and enriching.

Kelly Savoie:

Oh, that's so cool. I've always had a very hard time using chopsticks. I'm trying desperately to get the technique down, but I always ask for the fork.

Ayako Ota:

If you came across seasonal chopstick rests, I encourage you to try them and enjoy the experience.

Emma Collins:

Do you enjoy setting them up for when the seasons change and you have a new set of rests, do you enjoy bringing them out and making a nice table?

Ayako Ota:

Yes, I love to do it.

Emma Collins:

And then did you say you had another hobby?

Ayako Ota:

Yes. Since coming to the US a year ago, I have found a new love visiting your national parks. I've been to the Grand Canyon and Joshua Tree, and I was thrilled by the unusual landscapes that hardly feel like they belong on earth. I believe that weather has been a major factor in shaping these scenes, so it's exciting to think about that as I explore. I hope to visit as many parks as possible.

Emma Collins:

And you have a lot in California, so I hope you can see all of them.

Kelly Savoie:

A couple of years ago, I did a tour of some national parks, the Grand Canyon, Zion National Park, which is in Utah, and Bryce National Park. I don't think they're that far from Los Angeles. I mean, maybe six hours, seven hour drive. So yeah, you should. They're beautiful.

Ayako Ota:

Right now, I'm especially looking forward to visiting Zion and the Yosemite National Park. If you have any recommendations on things to do there, please let me know.

Kelly Savoie:

I will. Well, for Zion, I don't know if you like to hike, but there's something called the Narrows, which is a hike through water. You get waterproof hiking boots and a hiking stick. And it's about seven miles and you hike through the river, but it's beautiful. So I highly recommend that one.

Ayako Ota:

I have a two-year-old daughter. Is that okay?

Kelly Savoie:

Yeah, that would probably be too young. The water got pretty deep in certain parts, like up to my chest. So you might want to wait a little bit before you take them, or you may have to carry them the whole way. Carry them.

Ayako Ota:

Yes. That sounds interesting.

Emma Collins:

Thanks so much for joining us, Ayako, and for sharing your work experiences with us.

Ayako Ota:

Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciated it.

Kelly Savoie:

Well, that's our show for today. Please join us next time, rain or shine. Clear Skies Ahead: Conversations about Careers in Meteorology and Beyond is a podcast by the American Meteorological Society. Our show is edited by Johnny Le. Technical direction is provided by Peter Killelea.

Our theme music is composed and performed by Steve Savoie, and the show is hosted by Emma Collins and Kelly Savoie. You can learn more about the show online at www.ametsoc.org/clearskies, and you can contact us at skypodcast@ametsoc.org if you have any feedback or would like to become a future guest.