

■ At the Morioka Sansa Odori Festival

■ Amanda Wayama (center) with colleagues at an Iwate Prefecture promotional event in Taiwan

Showcasing the People of Iwate

U.S. native and Iwate Prefectural Government officer Amanda Wayama has been communicating the importance of community ties to people in Japan and abroad by sharing her experience of the Great East Japan Earthquake and the reconstruction of its towns and cities. She now calls Iwate Prefecture her home.

SATO KUMIKO

Ten years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami of 2011. Having suffered enormous damage to its coastal areas facing the Pacific Ocean, Iwate Prefecture has seen steady progress in the rebuilding of roads and other

infrastructure and in relocating the community to higher ground, with the redevelopment of urban areas almost complete. Amanda Wayama, who hails from the United States and is employed by the Iwate Prefectural Government to handle international exchange and the dissemination of infor-

mation, says, “At the time of the earthquake, Iwate Prefecture received support not just from the rest of Japan but from all over the world. Once the spread of COVID-19 is under control, the people of Iwate would like to express our gratitude for that support by extending our hospitality to everyone who visits the prefecture.”

The Michinoku Coastal Trail (see *Highlighting JAPAN*, May 2020 issue) extends 1,025 kilometers from Hachinohe City, Aomori Prefecture in the north to Soma City, Fukushima Prefecture in the south, passing through Iwate Prefecture. Here visitors can experience the natural splendor of forests, mountains and sea, as well as the culture of each region. One of the attractions along the trail are the Kitayamazaki cliffs on the northern coast of Iwate, where visitors can take a ride on small fishing boats called *sappa* boats operated by local fishermen to see the coastline up close. Amanda highly recommends the activity as one that exemplifies Iwate’s unique appeal, offering visitors both the opportunity to appreciate

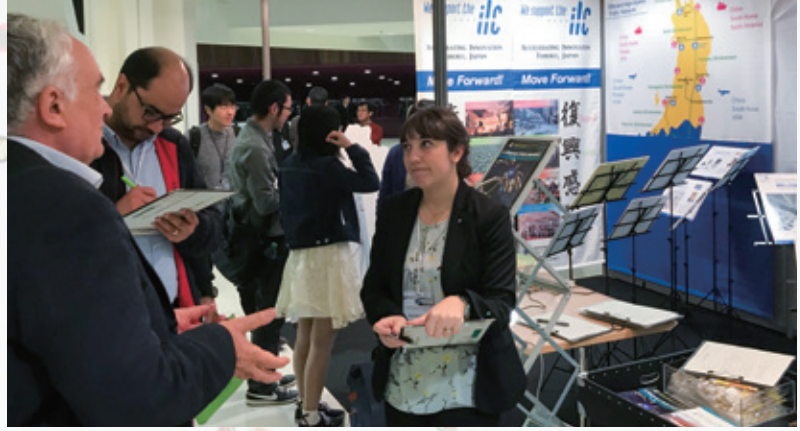
Screenshot from Amanda’s blog ■ showcasing the “people of Iwate”



something of the prefecture's natural attractions and the chance to interact with the locals.

A long-time fan of Japanese anime and games, Amanda first came to Japan in 2007 on a short-term study-abroad program in Kyoto when she was a university student. That experience made her realize that life in Japan was a good fit for her. She applied to the JET Programme, a Japanese government initiative which invites overseas youth to Japan to promote international exchange in local public entities, and was assigned to the Iwate Prefectural Government in 2009.

Initially knowing nothing at all about Iwate Prefecture, Amanda found her work to be very rewarding as she shared information with people overseas about the prefecture's rich nature, history and culture, and promoted mutual exchange between Iwate Prefecture and the United States through social media. Then the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami struck. Although the earthquake was felt strongly in the prefectural capital city of Morioka, where Amanda lives, the city suffered relatively little damage. Gradu-



ally, however, news came through of the damage elsewhere in the prefecture and she learned that many towns along the coast had been devastated by the tsunami. Amanda conducted relief activities, such as going around the radio stations in the prefecture and making announcements in English. She recalls feeling at the time “determined to do whatever I could for my ‘hometown.’”

After her five-year stint on the JET Programme ended, Amanda stayed on at the Iwate Prefectural Government. Back when she first arrived in Iwate alone from abroad, Amanda met people who welcomed her warmly and looked out for her, people who supported each other when the earthquake struck. She even met her husband in Iwate. For Amanda, “the biggest attraction of Iwate Prefecture is its people.” She decided to showcase the people of Iwate who face the challenges of recovering from the disaster, launching the blog “PEOPLE of IWATE” in 2017 as a new way of promoting the prefecture. The blog showcases people in Iwate whom Amanda has met in person and been impressed by. One such person is a woman in Morioka City who started a company producing *sakiori*, the Tohoku folk handicraft of weaving ripped old clothes into new fabric, and con-

tributes to the local community by employing people with disabilities (see *Highlighting JAPAN*, January 2014 issue). Another is a woman in Miyako City who runs tours to communicate the significance of disaster prevention, despite herself having painful memories of being affected by the tsunami.

“In April last year (2020), I left the Office of International Affairs and transferred to the Office of Tourism and Promotion, where I’m in charge of promoting Iwate’s official VTuber (Virtual YouTuber), Iwate Sachiko, to viewers outside the prefecture. In my new department I’ll be able to learn more about Iwate Prefecture and take my knowledge to a deeper level, so I’m looking forward to expanding my potential,” says Amanda.

Another of her tasks is to help bring the International Linear Collider, a proposed linear particle accelerator, to the Kitakami mountains, which run from southern Iwate Prefecture to northern Miyagi Prefecture. Amanda outlines her aspirations: “If the project comes to fruition, the Kitakami mountains of Tohoku will become the home to thousands of world-class researchers and engineers for the next ten to twenty years. Through my work to help realize this project, I hope to promote Iwate Prefecture to people around the world.”



Amanda (second right) interpreting at an event hosted by the Iwate Prefectural Government