

Oceanographer

Study the ocean: its currents, its chemistry, its floor and the life in it. Long schooling, real ships, and a lot of the work happens on a laptop.

TYPICAL PAY

\$101,920

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$59k to \$200k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

4 to 9 years

after high school

DEMAND

Moderate

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

No

anyone can do it

WHERE YOU WORK

**Research ships, university labs,
federal agencies, coastal field sta...**

How you get there

- 1 High school** Grades 11 and 12
 Physics, chemistry, biology and as much math as you can take. Oceanography is not a separate subject yet, it is those four applied to salt water.
- 2 Bachelor's degree** 4 years
 Physics, chemistry, geology, biology, math or a marine science degree. A pure science major with ocean electives keeps more doors open than a narrow marine program.
- 3 Research experience as an undergraduate** 1 or 2 summers
 A summer in a lab or on a research cruise. This is what gets you into graduate school, more than grades.
- 4 Master's degree** 2 years
 Enough for most agency, consulting and survey jobs. Often paid for by a research assistantship.
- 5 Doctorate** 5 to 6 years
 Needed to run your own research program, lead a lab or teach at a university. Funded, and long.

Pros and cons

- + Real discovery, on a planet that is mostly still unmapped
- + Sea time in places very few people see
- + Graduate school is usually funded, not borrowed
- Six to ten years of school for the research jobs
- Grant funding is unstable and political
- Permanent academic positions are few and fiercely contested

Good to know

Most of the sea floor has never been properly mapped

Large parts of the ocean floor have still only been measured from satellites, at a resolution too coarse to see anything smaller than a mountain. An international effort is trying to map the whole thing wit...

Thousands of robots are doing the work

The Argo network is a global fleet of drifting floats that sink to about 2,000 meters, drift for ten days, then rise to the surface measuring temperature and salinity on the way up and radio the data home by...

Optional boosts

Programming. Instrument work. Scientific diving certification. Small boat handling.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Geoscientists, Except Hydrologists and Geographers (19-2042.00)
 National Ocean Service: what does an oceanographer do
 Scripps Institution of Oceanography, University of California San Diego
 Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/oceanographer>



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