Mehta assures students who are willing to look beyond academia that jobs are out there. “There are quite a few public research opportunities,” she says, including positions with aquariums, non-profit organizations and governments at the federal, state and municipal level. Tetra Tech, a consulting firm based in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, is seeking an aquatic ecologist, and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in Dutch Harbor wants a fishery biologist, for example. The inexhaustible pool of interest in ocean science among the general public also opens up opportunities for researchers with a penchant for teaching, Mehta adds (see “Those who can, teach”). If an early-career scientist knows a few things about sea lions, great white sharks or oysters, there will always be people who want to hear about it.

But none of those jobs are easily won. “There are numerous career options,” says Erich Hoyt, a researcher with the global non-profit organization Whale and Dolphin Conservation in Chippenham, UK. “But because so many people want to get into the field, you need dedication and creativity.” He says that he received more than 200 applications when he recently put out a call for an assistant.

Studying marine mammals in the field requires an especially diverse skill set, Hoyt says. Among other things, he says, researchers need to be able to handle boats of all sizes, take photos, make sound recordings, sort through streams of data and write papers. Hoyt does all these, as well as giving regular talks and writing popular books, including the 2013 children's book Weird Sea Creatures, a side career that has undoubtedly sent more young people down a path towards a career in ocean science.

What opportunities will those students have? It depends on the student. “There are no guaranteed jobs post-graduation in any field, especially in a competitive area such as marine biology,” Davies says. But the picture is not hopeless. “There is always a need for enthusiastic, motivated and hard-working graduates who have the confidence to tackle challenges head on.” If that challenge involves spotting blue whales from a boat or scuba diving with a pod of dolphins, so be it. It is a tough job, but some marine biologist will have to do it.

Chris Woolston is a landlocked freelance writer in Billings, Montana.