

just one consideration,” says Murphy. “Lease rates often will be low in an area when the first offers are made. You never should feel compelled to sign when first approached. Talk with neighbors and others to find out what is being offered.” He points out that lease offers that started at about \$15 per acre two years ago are now as high as \$2,500 per acre. And that does not include royalties on any gas extracted, which can be 15 percent or more.

“Also, know what you’re signing in a lease,” Murphy says. “Leases typically contain a lot of fine print with unfamiliar terms. Seek legal advice, and remember that it’s your land, so if there’s gas under it, that belongs to you as well. You need to partner with a company to explore for it, but it should be on terms that favor both parties. The bottom line is understand everything before you sign anything.”

Meanwhile, researchers and extension specialists in the College of Agricultural Sciences are gearing up to address other issues related to natural-gas exploration:

- How communities can keep some of the expected natural-gas revenues at home to create jobs and promote economic development
- How competing land uses can be reconciled to encourage sustainable growth and development
- How gas exploration can affect local tax revenues and property values
- How potential environmental impacts can be minimized to protect water quality and quantity, soils, forestland, and other natural resources
- How landowners signing a natural-gas lease can wisely manage their potential windfall

For more information, visit the Penn State Cooperative Extension Web site on gas and oil leasing at [naturalgas.extension.psu.edu](http://naturalgas.extension.psu.edu).

—Chuck Gill

## A Whale of an Experience

Kate Swails didn’t know what to expect when she decided to tag along on a research vessel cruising the Gulf of Maine for three weeks.

The recent Penn State alumna, who majored in Environmental Resource Management (ERM), evaluates and grants scientific research permits in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Marine Fisheries Service office. Joining 10 other scientists, she decided to see the research up close and personal.

“The researchers were looking for humpback, northern right, and pilot whales,” says Swails. “There are only a few more than 300 northern right whales left in existence.”

It took some time for her to get used to life on a boat. Thick fog along the coast made the trip cold and whale-spotting difficult. But she relished the opportunity to get close to the mammals. Once, the boat was surrounded by pilot whales. “They were right underneath us, and I could hear them breathing and splashing,” she says.

Her favorite memory was an evening when the fog finally lifted, and she realized the boat was in the middle of a large group of pilot whales just as the sun was setting. “It was so surreal and beautiful,” Swails says.

***It took some time for her to get used to life on a boat. Thick fog along the coast made the trip cold and whale-spotting difficult.***

The 2003 graduate said her major in the College of Agricultural Sciences expanded her knowledge about environmental management because she took science courses, such as chemistry and biology, in addition to environmental economics and environmental law. “I have to be familiar with policy, management, biology, and law to do my job,” she says. “Majoring in ERM gave me the interdisciplinary background I needed.”

—Bethany Fehlinger



PHOTO: COURTESY OF KATE SWAILS

**Alumna Kate Swails, who evaluates and grants research permits for NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service, recently viewed whale studies up close and personal.**

