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# THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

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SEPTEMBER 4, 2008

## Environment lawyer loves Joshua Tree home

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By **JENNIFER BOWLES**

*The Press-Enterprise*

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The Toyota Prius in Kassie Siegel's driveway is the first clue to her leanings. A tour of the Joshua Tree attorney's house reveals them even more.

An array of solar panels sits in the backyard; a solar water heater is propped on the roof, and a simple clothesline hangs outside. Each one does its part to reduce the amount of energy used in her home.

"I love my clothesline. It does take a little more work though," she said with a laugh.

Siegel, 35, is on a mission to use less coal-generated electricity, a main source of greenhouse gases that cause climate change. The environmental attorney wants to do her part to prevent a warming climate from further melting the icy habitat of the creatures that live in the polar opposite of her home, which sits in the Mojave Desert among the Joshua trees.

That means polar bears, penguins, seals and other creatures that ply the chilly waters of the North and South poles.

"Saving polar bears right now is a monumental task, the window is slamming shut," she said.

Siegel's nearly four-year effort to get polar bears protected under

the U.S. Endangered Species Act became a reality on May 14 when Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne announced he would list them as a threatened species.

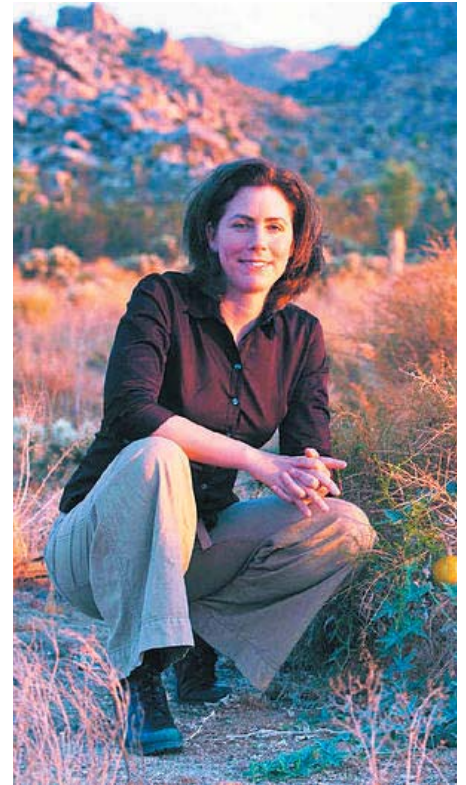
As an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, Siegel was the main author of the first petition, 170 pages in all, to the U.S. Department of the Interior. Later, two heavy-hitting environmental groups, Greenpeace and the Natural Resources Defense Council, joined what became a legal battle.

But it has been Siegel who has been the face of the effort, with three invited appearances to testify before Congress in a six-month period. Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works in April, Siegel adamantly criticized the Bush administration for missing "every single deadline" in issuing a decision on whether to protect polar bears. And she accused the administration of illegally delaying the decision in order to allow oil development to go forward in the Chukchi Sea, home to one of two major Alaskan populations of polar bears.

"I'm not one who gravitates to conflict," Siegel said. "But if you want to be an advocate you have to stand up for what you believe in."

### **Mountains to the Desert**

Siegel first came to the Inland region in 2001, when she and her significant other, Brendan Cummings, also an



**Rodrigo Peña / The Press-Enterprise**

Kassie Siegel, 35, an attorney from Joshua Tree, was successful in getting the federal government to list the polar bears under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, opened the group's first local office in Idyllwild.

The nonprofit headquartered in Tucson, Ariz., has gained a national reputation for successfully suing government agencies to block activities that might harm endangered species. But that's also left folks like off-roaders upset because in some instances their riding grounds have shrunk to protect a threatened plant.

Siegel initially focused on land-use issues and filed lawsuits on large

Inland developments she believed failed to consider the impacts on climate change or whether there was an ample water supply. But her focus turned to the ends of the Earth when she became director of the group's climate, air and energy program. Soon, she will become director of the group's soon-to-be opened Climate Law Institute.

After a few years in the mountains, Siegel and Cummings left Idyllwild for the desert landscape of Joshua Tree.

"I wasn't particularly inclined to leave Idyllwild," she said, noting that Cummings, who ironically is the Center's oceans program director, convinced her to head down the hill and toward the cactus.

In her Joshua Tree home office, Siegel watches roadrunners and quails tweeter by in the back yard. But the posters above her desk remind her of the creatures she's trying to save. Three idle polar bears are just hanging out in one poster that calls them the "Bad Boys of the Arctic."

Still, her attention often turns to her back yard as when a family of quail saunter by.

"Oh look, there they go," she said.

## **Court of Determination**

Siegel's determination as an attorney was forged in another court -- the tennis court -- where she became competitive enough to gain an athletic scholarship to the College of William and Mary in Virginia.

After majoring in anthropology and economics, she fled to Alaska and began guiding wilderness tours in the rivers and parks. But while there, she saw some of the scenic areas at risk of development.

"I then decided I wanted to do more to protect the places," she said.

Siegel, who grew up in New Jersey, went to law school at Berkeley where she interned with the Center for Biological Diversity in its early years.

"She had a real intense preparedness about her," recalled Peter Galvin, one of the group's co-founders. "And so all aspects literally from helping repair the equipment to researching the legal opinions to getting more supplies. Whatever it was, it was basically a complete and total confidence that she could take on any task or series of tasks."

Galvin said he never looked back at making Siegel more than an intern.

"You can't think of a better person to have on your team. That was apparent," he said. "And it's been one of those experiences from the beginning of being, 'Wow, this is exactly the kind of person that's going to make our organization even better, if only there were more.'"

Today, Siegel gives Al Gore's climate change presentation, made famous by his "An Inconvenient Truth" documentary, to anyone who asks. For dealing with a topic of such magnitude that has potentially dire consequences for the world, Siegel says she doesn't get discouraged when people doubt what she says.

"I get so many e-mails from people telling me global warming isn't happening," Siegel said. "What can you do? You have to keep working to try to make the world a better place."