

Shee Atika land transfer challenged

The Associated Press

Juneau — The Sierra Club has filed suit to stop a Sitka-based Alaska Native corporation from obtaining lands on Admiralty Island in Southeast Alaska.

The suit filed earlier this month in the federal district court in Washington, D.C., contends Interior Secretary James Watt illegally granted Shee Atika Inc. 23,000 acres in the northwest section of the 1.1 million-acre island.

The conveyance of the land violated "provisions in the Alaska Lands Act and the and the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act that protect the Admiralty Island National Monument from logging and other environmental degradation planned by the corporations," the environmental organization said in a press release Tuesday.

Shee Atika spokesman Warren Weathers said the corporation expected the suit.

"We're not shocked that they've done this, but we're disappointed," he said.

Interior Department officials refused to comment on the case.

Shee Atika spent considerable time working with the U.S. Forest Service to see that

popular recreation areas within the land selection are protected, Weathers said.

Lakes Florence, Kathleen and Peanut — popular spots for hunting, fishing and camping — are surrounded by Shee Atika lands. Cube Cove, a winter anchorage on Chatham Strait and a hunting area, is adjacent to Shee Atika's selection.

The northwest Admiralty land selections have been a source of controversy since 1975 when the Sierra Club and the village of Angoon filed suit to block land selections by Goldbelt, Inc., a Juneau-based Native village corporation.

After years of costly litigation, Goldbelt agreed to swap rights to land on northwest Admiralty for land off the island. The firm is now preparing to log lands it obtained along Stephens Passage in Southeast Alaska.

When Goldbelt deserted its controversial land claims on northwest Admiralty, Shee Atika asked to be moved there from its even more controversial land claims near Hood Bay on the south end of the island.

Congress approved moving Shee Atika's claims north in the Alaska Lands Act.