

Gwich'in fight to protect their way of life

ANWR suit filed

Gwich'in Indian representatives last week brought suit against U.S. Secretary of the Interior Manuel Lujan, challenging his recommendation to Congress to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil development.

The suit charges the secretary's report to Congress and Legislative Environmental Impact Statement underestimate the impacts to the Porcupine Caribou Herd and other wildlife and fail to address the potential harm to the Gwich'in people, culture and way of life.

They also claim the secretary greatly exaggerated the oil potential of the area by using unrealistic economic assumptions about the price of oil — \$33 a barrel in 1986 dollars.

The Gwich'in are the northermost Indian nation in North American. The people live in about 15 small villages and towns scattered across northeast Alaska and northwest Canada.

In Alaska among the villages are Arctic Village, Venetie, Fort Yukon and other villages of the Yukon Flats. In Canada, among the primary communities are Old Crow, Fort McPherson, Arctic Red River and Aklavik.

"This is a simple issue. We have the right to continue our Gwich'in way of life," said Sarah James of Arctic Village, chair of the Gwich'in Steering Committee which brought the action.

"We are caribou people. We still do caribou dance, sing caribou song, wear the hide, use bone for tools and tell the story," she said. "Caribou is how we get from one year to another. Oil development in their calving and nursery grounds would hurt the caribou and could destroy our culture and way of life."

The Gwich'in Steering Committee filed suit in U.S. District Court in

• Gwich'in file lawsuit

(Continued from Page One)

Washington, D.C., Aug. 28. The people are represented by the Native American Rights Fund, a public interest law firm with offices in Washington, D.C., and Alaska.

Jonathon Solomon, a Gwich'in elder from Fort Yukon and vice chair of the committee, said the action was necessary.

"It is the belief of our people that

the future of the Gwich'in and the future of the caribou are the same. We cannot stand by and let them sell our children's heritage to the oil companies," he said.

The suit asks the court to order the secretary to prepare a new report to Congress and a new environmental impact statement that will adequately address Gwich'in cultural survival and lower the estimate of oil potential.