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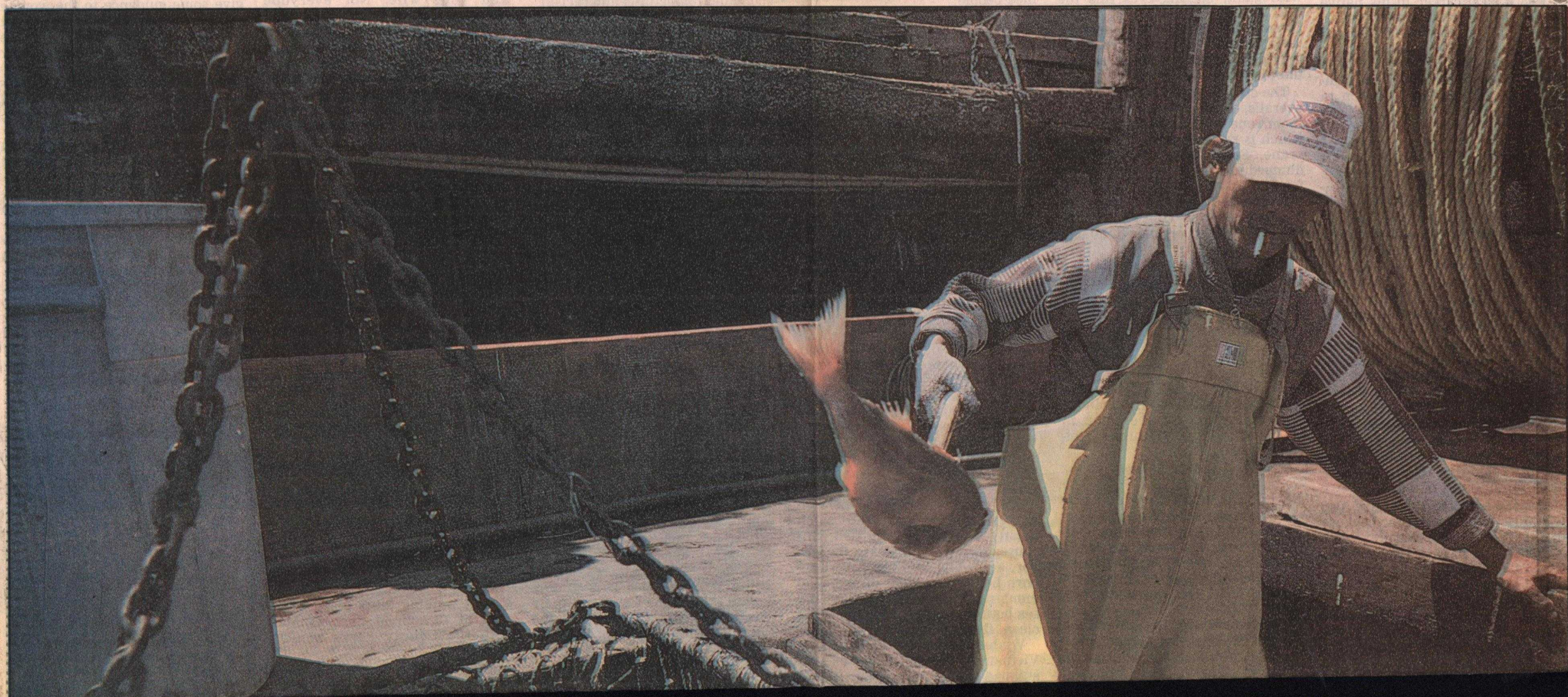
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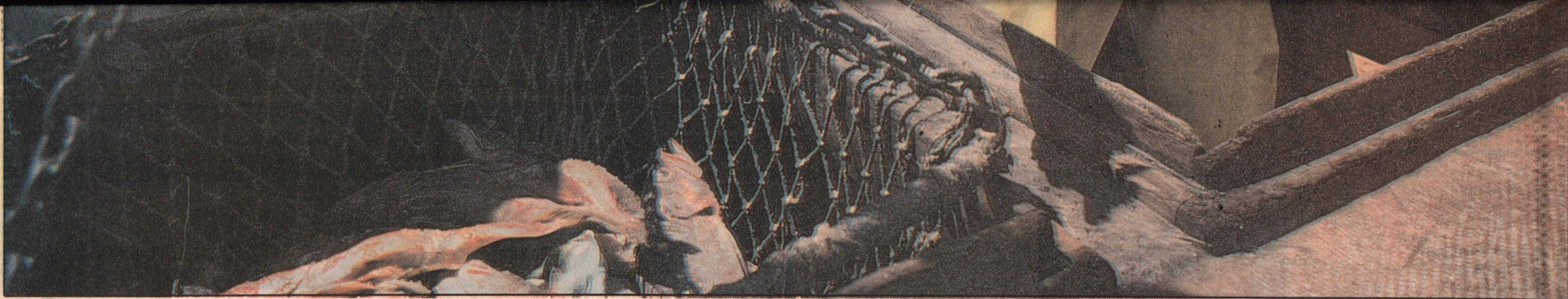
Vietnamese Refugees

~~Fish + fishing~~

Rough waters

Vietnamese fishermen brave political seas





By TRACIE WHITE
Sentinel staff writer

KHINH DUY LE squats on a Santa Cruz Harbor dock to examine the white paint peeling from the side of his fishing boat. He shakes his head and, in halting English, complains that the boat is too old, and it leaks.

But he doesn't own the boat. And he depends on it to support his wife and two children living in Marina. So the next day, the 30-year-old fisherman will leave on a two-month expedition on the "Sunrise II" to Alaska, where he'll gill-net fish for salmon.

"There's more money in Alaska," he explains.

Le, a short, thin man with hands gnarled and worn from his years at sea, is the only Vietnamese-born fisherman who docks in the Santa Cruz Harbor. He is well-known at the harbor as a hard worker and a good fisherman.

Like most of the Vietnamese fishermen in the Monterey Bay, Le is also known for going out fishing in any kind of weather, in an unstable boat, almost every day of the year.

The number of Vietnamese fishermen in the Monterey Bay has grown from 10 boats in 1980 to more than 75 this year, making this the largest community in the state. The majority dock in Moss Landing, sometimes stopping at the Santa Cruz Harbor to sell their fish. Most were fishermen in Vietnam who escaped the communist regime in the late '70s by going out fishing one day and never returning.

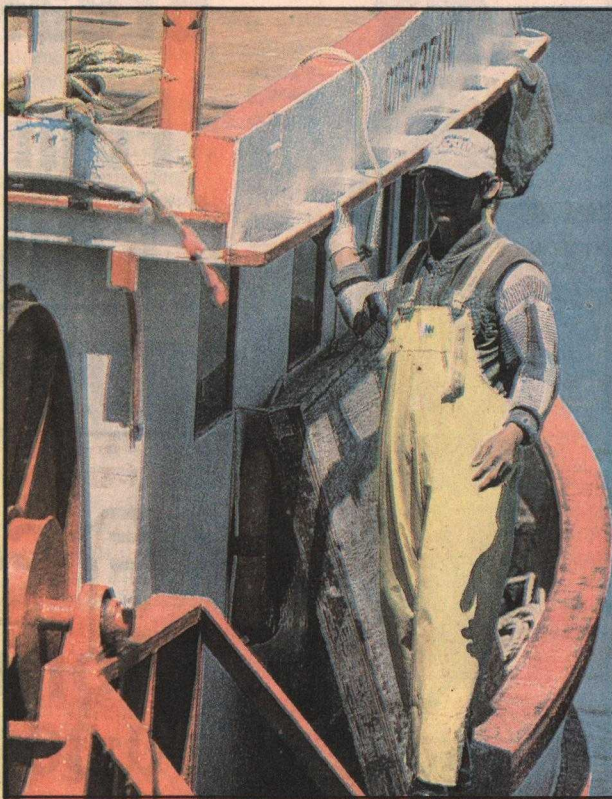
Since coming to the United States, they've faced a struggle to support their families. Most complain that in Vietnam, a fisherman could make a good living, while in the United States they barely get by. Yearly salaries average between \$10,000 to \$20,000 a year. Their boats are often rickety, the fishing isn't always good, and the weather's rough. But, they say, they have no other skills. Most speak very little English.

In addition, these fishermen have been laboring under the threat of a 200-year-old federal law which makes it illegal for non-U.S. citizens to own or operate a commercial fishing vessel over five tons.

The Vietnamese Fisherman's Association — a loosely knit group of 400 fishermen from the Monterey and San Francisco bay areas — maintains the law was rarely enforced until two years ago, when 30 to 40 fishermen were fined or told to stop fishing because they were not U.S. citizens.

As a result, the association brought a lawsuit against the U.S. Coast Guard in September, charging that the law prevents Vietnamese fishermen, "who are refugees and lawful permanent residents of the United States from earning a living as commercial fishermen."

The Coast Guard said it has always enforced the law and that it met with representatives of the Vietnamese before stopping their boats.



Two days at sea totals a small bottom line for Vietnamese fishermen. At Moss Landing harbor, tons of fish are unloaded, one at a time. Monterey Bay harbors the state's largest Vietnamese fishing colony, including Khinh Duy Le, above right.

Since November, a judge's restraining order has prevented the Coast Guard from enforcing the law until a final ruling on the suit has been made. Friday, lawyers presented their arguments in federal appeals court in San Francisco. A ruling is expected sometime within the next few months.

MAI CHAU, a Vietnamese refugee, lives and works in Marina where he prepares taxes for many of the Vietnamese fishermen who live there. He also owns a fishing boat that docks at Moss Landing.

"The fishermen are worried. They're waiting every day," said Chau, 48. "We're looking for any way to operate our boats. We still expect the courts and government to resolve the issue. Boat operators don't speak English. How can they become citizens?"

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'Fishing is very hard work. Don't have time for joy. Go out to sea. Come back and mend nets. Work every day.'

— Mai Chau

Photographs by Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Fishermen

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Most of the Vietnamese fishermen who have settled in California and along the Texas Gulf over the past 10 years are legal residents but not citizens. Many have applied for citizenship, but the process takes seven years, said Dennis Hyashi, an attorney with the Asian Law Caucus who is representing the Vietnamese Fisherman's Association in the lawsuit.

In halting English, Le said he knows about the citizenship law. The Coast Guard boarded his boat to warn him about it. He has filed for citizenship, but until "it goes through, he'll continue to fish.

"No citizenship, no fishing. No fishing, no money," he said, shrugging. "I have to keep fishing. I need money."

Le fled Vietnam in a fishing boat in 1979. He went out fishing one day with his brother and never came back.

"Communists no good," explained Le. "A lot of people got out."

Like his father before him, Le worked as a fisherman in Vietnam. It was a good career in his native country, but in the United States it's too difficult, Le said. He doesn't want his son to be a fisherman.

"No more fishing," said Le. "Too hard a life. I don't like my son fishing." He plans to send his son to college.

Le sells his fish to Bob Morrell fish distributors in the Santa Cruz Harbor. Morrell said usually about six Vietnamese boats unload their catch at his shop. But the number of boats has been decreasing recently, he claimed, due to the enforcement of the citizenship law.

"I usually do business with quite a few (Vietnamese)," said Morrell. "We used to have at least six to eight real steady boats. Now we're down to two. It's an economic thing for me. It affects jobs."

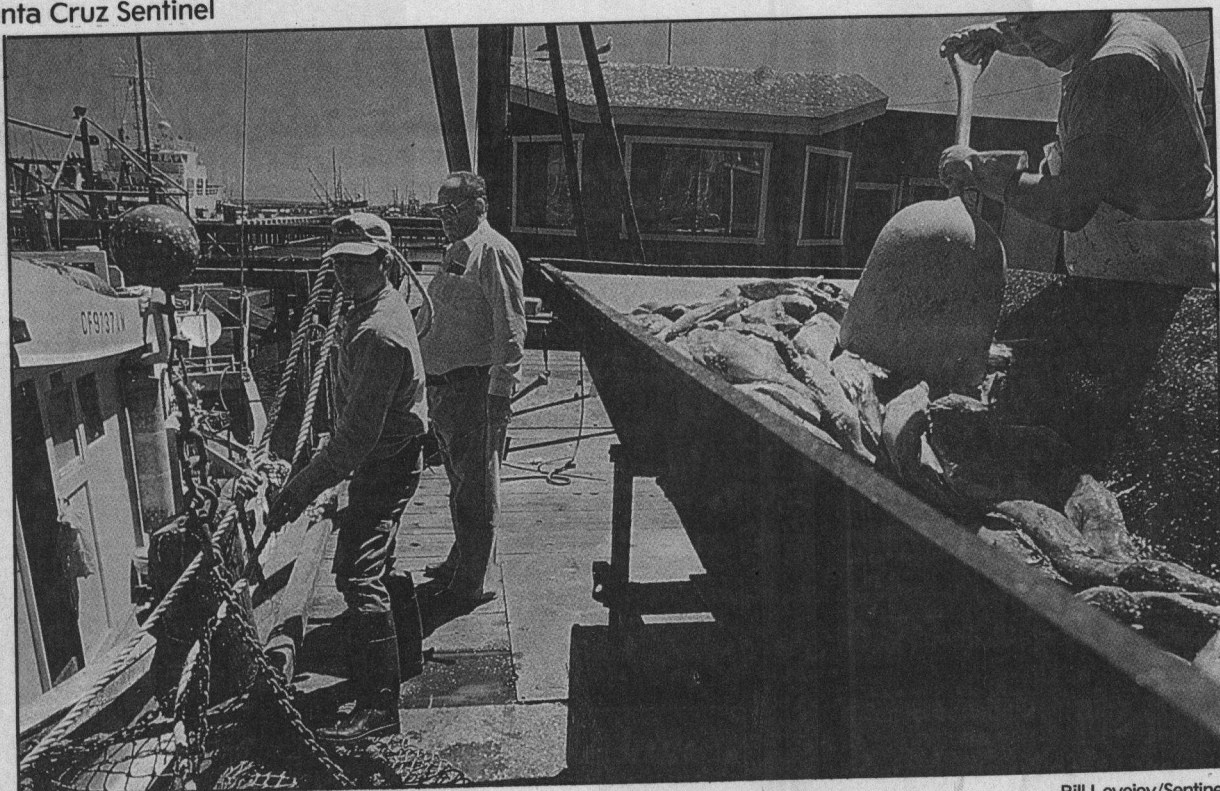
Taking Vietnamese fishermen out of the water not only hurts the Vietnamese, it hurts business for the fish distributors and the retailers as well, he said.

"Most of these Vietnamese fishermen support one, two, or three families," said Morrell. "It probably puts another eight or nine more families out of work."

Vietnamese fishermen have also left Moss Landing Harbor because of the recent enforcement of the citizenship law, said Harbor Master Craig Winter. Others are waiting to see what happens, afraid to take their boats out.

"They (the Coast Guard) were kind of turning their heads," said Winter. "Now they're suddenly enforcing the law." Winter maintains there's a simple answer to the problem.

"They've (the Vietnamese) been here long enough. Run out and get your citizenship. It's an easy solution."



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Vietnamese nets yield a bounty of rock cod and snapper.

Landing watching his two crew members unload 16 tons of rock cod. The cargo of large, orange fish with giant, bulging eyes fills the hull of the "Miss Phuong." The three Vietnamese-born fishermen returned the night before from four days fishing 15 miles out off the Monterey Bay coast.

The crew, dressed in slick yellow overalls, hook the fish and sling them, one by one, into a basket which is raised onto the dock by a crane. From there, the fish are dumped into ice-filled crates bound for San Francisco.

Across the top of the boat, the Vietnamese are drying some of the smaller fish, which they'll eat later.

Dressed in a red jacket, black pants, and tennis shoes, Nguyen oversees the operation. He slowly smokes a cigarette.

Nguyen's story of escape from Vietnam is repeated over and over again among the Vietnamese fishermen. He escaped in 1978 and made his way to California by way of St. Louis, Mo. The trip included 19 months in a refugee camp in Malaysia with 48,000 other Vietnamese refugees.

Nguyen has been a fisherman for 27 years. He was jailed by the North Vietnamese for five months at the end of the Vietnam War. "After 1975, they took a lot from me: my boat, my house, my land." When he got out of jail, the government gave him a job as skipper of a fishing boat. He took their boat and left Vietnam.

Nguyen studied English and mechanics at college in Salinas when he first moved to Marina, but he couldn't find work that paid enough to support his six children so he returned to fishing. He makes about \$20,000 a year.

"I have been fishing 37 years. This is a good job for me. Not very much money, but enough to take care of my family."

Nguyen pays Regal Fish distributors, a fee to unload his fish at this

dock. "They're good workers," said Victor Carniglia, the dock manager at Regal Fish Co. "They're pretty nice people."

RELATIONS between the American-born fishermen and the Vietnamese have greatly improved since 1983, when a number of conflicts between the two groups erupted into violence, said Winter, Moss Landing Harbor manager. Part of the conflict was caused by the Vietnamese unloading their fish in the parking lots.

"We didn't know where to unload our fish," said Chau. In 1983, resentment and fear between the two groups erupted into flames when someone torched three Vietnamese boats. Chau's boat was one of the three. That same year, Vietnamese fishermen staged a protest claiming they were targets of harassment and violence.

"The local fishermen didn't understand where we got the money to buy boats," said Chau. "They think we take the last fish."

Once a public unloading dock was built, most of the problems were solved, said Winter. "There is still a little bit of friction," he said. "It's more over the way their boats smell."

The use of gill nets by the Vietnamese fishermen, who catch mostly bottom-dwelling fish, still causes some resentment in the harbor, according to some American-born fishermen. Made of monofilament nylon stretched across the sea bottom, the nets rape the ocean clean, fishermen say.

Winter claims that as many non-Vietnamese fishermen as Vietnamese use the nets and that it's no longer a source of resentment.

Hyashi, who is representing the Vietnamese Fishermen's Association, maintains that racism is still the motivating force behind implementation of the 200-year-old citizenship law.

"I think essentially, we believe

the Coast Guard was being encouraged to enforce the law by non-Vietnamese fishermen because of economic competition and racism."

But Winter doesn't see this.

"The attitude is, they have to make a living just like everybody else." The Vietnamese fishermen, he said, are respected for their hard work.

"If white fishermen worked as hard as they do, they would be rich," said Winter. "I admire them. They know how to work."

"Man, it can be blowing son of a gun out there, they'll stay out. They've got a good work ethic — but junky boats." In the past three years, three Vietnamese fishing boats have been lost in rough weather, said Winter.

"They'll go out in anything. Ninety-nine percent of their boats are in bad shape. Soon as that sea gets mean every one of those salmon fishermen are high-tailing it back."

Not the Vietnamese.

BUT THE hard work and low pay are taking their toll on the Vietnamese. In addition to discouraging their sons from becoming fishermen, they are starting to leave the Monterey Bay, according to Chau.

"Fishing is very hard work," he said. "Don't have time for joy. Go out to sea. Come back and mend nets. Work every day." The first generation of Vietnamese refugees in the Monterey Bay is beginning to leave the sea, following their children when they grow up and move away to Stockton or Oakland or Salinas.

Many still harbor hopes of eventually going back to Vietnam, but the hopes are beginning to fade.

"When freedom in Vietnam, I come back," said Le. He still has family there and he misses his native land. "Now, if I come back, they'll shoot me."

THOAI VAN NGUYEN, 43, stands on a dock at Moss