My paper will address the theme of societies and environments through time in relation to a specific problem: the historical practice of slavery among certain non-agricultural populations on the Pacific coast of North America, and its corresponding rejection by other, proximate forager societies in the same region. I will suggest that recent attempts to explain the presence or absence of slavery purely in terms of ecological factors (e.g. a focus on aquatic over terrestrial resources) are unconvincing, and that a more holistic approach is needed, taking into account evidence for the divergence of moral, legal, and political systems among non-agricultural societies over time.