

Weather, resources linked to slavery

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An Australian study says inconsistent weather and spotty resources prevented inequality from emerging in some early hunter-gatherer societies.

However, pre-colonial indigenous societies of the northwest coast of North America and the American southeast are notable for their marked social hierarchies, including chiefdoms and, in some cases, slavery.

"The conditions for the development of marked inequality -- in North America -- included reliable and prolific resources such as salmon, relatively high population densities, and the defense of territories and their resources," says Ian Keen of Australian National University.

Keen compares complex hunter-gatherer societies in North America and Australia, and despite considerable variation in environments and resources, nowhere in Australia did "enduring inequality" such as ranked lineage or chiefly office prevail.

However, Australian Aboriginal societies on the tropical northern coast of Australia were marked by "transient inequality" arising from high levels of polygyny, with some older men claiming more than 20 wives.

"The major constraint on the development of enduring inequality was the unpredictability of climates and resources," Keen writes in current *Anthropology*.

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