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COMMUNITY

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## Mount A MAD scientist looks to trees for historical information

At Mount Allison's dendrochronology lab, also known as the MAD lab, science and history go hand in hand.

Trees can relay a wealth of historical information, according to dendrochronologist Colin Laroque. You just have to know how to read them.

"Dendrochronology is tree-ring analysis," explains Laroque. "Most tree species add one ring every year and that ring incorporates its entire growing environment. If it was a good growing year, it will make a wide fat ring, and if it was a poor growing year it will make a little ring; that's what I read."

One of the most important things dendrochronologists can learn from reading tree rings is past environmental conditions.

Laroque says this is especially relevant in areas such as the Sydney Tar Ponds, which have been drastically affected by human activity.

"If you ask what it was like in 1989, 1968, 1929, nobody has a clue. If you take a sample from the tree, we can see what it was like in 1929 and that's really cool," Dr. Laroque enthuses.

Even in parts of Canada with long histories of European settlement, such as the Maritimes, weather records only go back approximately 100 years.

But, says Laroque, "some trees have been here for 400 years so if you want to know climate conditions, you can go back and get an approximation of what it was like then."

Understanding the past can also help predict the future. The ability to gain information about climate events that pre-date written records is crucial as we begin to experience the effects of increasing temperatures.

The MAD lab is currently in possession of a piece of 4,000-year-old wood that may hold some answers about climate change in the region, explains Laroque.

"It comes from Labrador, in a mountain area where

the tree line was higher than it is now because it was warmer," he said

"Since then it got cooler and the trees were preserved in a bog. Because the climate is warming up again, we are starting to see conditions similar to 4,000 years ago. We can infer from what's already happened what the climates are going to be like in years to come and how things are going to be growing."

Laroque's work also contributes to an understanding of more recent history. His lab crew has helped date historical artefacts ranging from New Brunswick's oldest house, to a First Nations' canoe, to what may be the world's oldest hockey stick.

Most of this work is done for historical or heritage societies, as well as for the provincial and federal governments.

Helping with history, though interesting, is not terribly profitable.

"These are non-profit groups; these people do things like bake sales to make their money. They have maybe \$200 a year and we have to charge maybe \$200 per hour for the people, the equipment and the expertise that we provide. We often help them but just ask to recover the costs of our materials; otherwise they couldn't afford what we do," says Laroque.

Luckily for both the dendrochronologists and the local historians, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) provides funding for Laroque's work.

"This helps keep my daily operations going and helps with the students' initiatives, when I take them to conferences," he explains.

Laroque adds, "every time a student comes in with a new project, it's so easy to get excited about it!"



Mount Allison geography and environment professor and dendrochronologist Colin Laroque prepares to go 'on location' to conduct field research.