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N.B. student calls oldest spruce tree discovery 'magical'

Last Updated Thu, 20 Oct 2005 18:47:23 EDT
CBC News

A third-year university student has found the world's oldest-known red spruce tree – and he's not telling where it is.

Mount Allison student Ben Phillips found the tree while walking along the Bay of Fundy coast last summer. He took a core sample, and then counted all the rings under a high-powered microscope.

Phillips describes his latest discovery as magical. "The tree itself just has this glow about it. You can tell it's significant when you approach it."

The tree is so old, it predates European colonization in North America. It's at least 445 years old and the oldest documented red spruce tree on the planet.

Most red spruce trees have a lifespan of about 400 years. The previous record was held by a 405-year-old tree in New Hampshire.

Climate record

Phillips said the record-holding tree is small, only approximately 30 centimetres in diameter, and scraggly looking.

He's keeping its location secret because he's worried gawkers might trample on its roots, or someone might cut it down. He said it's healthy and could live many more years.

"The last time I was in there I kind of apologized to the tree for taking the core, and just told it how important I think it is," said Phillips. "I don't want other people to go in there and trample it down. The human impact that it's escaped is the reason why it's still there."

Phillips is studying dendochronology, or tree-ring



A close-up view of the world's oldest documented red spruce tree rings.

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His supervisor, Colin Laroque, said this discovery will open a world of knowledge for many in the scientific community because tree rings hold valuable information about climate patterns.



Ben Phillips takes a core sample.

"We were hoping that Ben's searching might produce a tree up to 300 years old, which would have been impressive enough, but we never dreamed he'd find a 400-plus-year-old tree. This is a truly spectacular find," said Laroque.

"Ben has delivered to us a single, unbroken record of growth conditions in the region, a record that all other data can now be checked against."

Phillips received a grant from the Royal Canadian Geographic Society to look at how weather changes affect trees in the lowland-fog forest of the Fundy Basin, compared to those growing above the fog zone in the Caledonia Highlands.

He is using samples from red spruce trees to figure out what the weather was like at both lower and upper-elevation locations during the last few hundred years.

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