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Tree of life

Growing up in Moncton, N.B., Ben Phillips spent his summers hiking the coastal trail of Fundy National Park among dense pockets of red spruce protected from logging because of the area's rough terrain. Then, last August, Phillips, an environmental studies and geography student at Mount Allison University, returned to determine how historical climate changes have affected the remote woods.

In the course of his fieldwork, funded in part by The Royal Canadian Geographical Society, Phillips discovered the world's oldest red spruce. And while the 445-year-old tree is 40 years older than the previous record holder, in New Hampshire, it isn't exactly a towering giant. "It's a scraggly, mangy-looking tree," Phillips says, "and it is smaller than many of



Ben Phillips (RIGHT, at left) and instructor Colin Laroque sampled red spruce to find the world's oldest (ABOVE, at right).

the other trees around it." He knew it was significant because of its shimmering bark, the product of a resident organism that gives spruces of a certain age a greenish white glint.

For now, Phillips is keeping the location of the ancient

grove a secret. "The only reason it's still there is because it's been undisturbed," he says. His unique knowledge has led to several TV and newspaper interviews. A group of elementary school students in Moncton, however, was less impressed. "I took some tree cookies [cross-sections] to show them how we count the rings, and they said, 'You have to do that all day?'" Phillips sighs. "But I don't find it bad at all. Every tree is different



and has its own personality tied up in its rings. I hope to do this for the rest of my life."