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Tree analysis helps solve historical mysteries

by Kevin Gill
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Jasper Booster — We all know that trees don't talk but the information contained within them can speak volumes. Nobody knows that better than a group of researchers from the Maritimes who were in the park last week studying a number of long forgotten historical wood structures. The research crew is led by Colin Laroque, an assistant professor at Mt. Allison University. He's also the director of the MAD Lab - short for the Mount Allison Dendrochronology Lab.



Researcher Ben Phillips takes an increment core sample from a tree in the Buffalo Prairie area.
Kevin Gill photo

While children are often taught that they can find out the age of a tree by counting its rings, the MAD Lab takes this simple concept to an entirely new level. Simply put, dendrochronology refers to tree ring analysis, but the level of detail and precision the researchers incorporate is astounding. The crew collects samples in two ways. The first is cutting through wood to get a cross section and the second is used on live trees, as so not to damage them. In this case, a hand auger is used to retrieve what is called an increment core sample. Once samples have been taken they are studied extensively in the lab, where they are measured under a microscope or on a hi-resolution scanner. The ring widths are then measured, up to 1,000th of a millimetre. The samples reveal how a tree has grown during its lifetime, as researchers can pinpoint a good growing season (a wide ring) or poor growing season (a narrow ring). By counting back and studying the rings and patterns the researchers are also able to date when the wood used for a structure was cut, thereby giving them a good idea of when it was built. Each of the rings can also reveal other information including the prevailing winds the tree faced and if it was ever attacked by fire or insects.

Answering the park's historical questions
 So what does all this kind of research have to do with Jasper National Park? Simply put, Parks will be using the information they get from the researchers as one more clue in solving the

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historical mysteries behind various wooden structures.

Establishing the age of each structure creates a starting point for further research including historical, social and cultural significance.

The researchers were in the park for about a week, looking at 13 or 14 different sites.

"It kind of makes you a detective of history...trying to place it in your mental map of time...and who was using it and why," said Laroque.

Among the types of places the researchers looked at were a corral, a number of log cabins, some railroad-related structures, and one that is possibly related to highway construction.

It's important for this kind of research to be done now before the evidence is lost forever. Wood at some of these sites is rotting away and sometimes it's difficult to even notice that there may have been a structure in an area at all.

"All of a sudden we can have that history locked in...but if we don't do it now it will just rot away, go back to the earth and that will be it," said Laroque.

JNP Cultural Resource Warden Mike Dillon said it's important to add this kind of research to what Parks already knows about some of the local historical structures. He added that there is a lot of history in the park that people don't know about that has just been forgotten over time.

"It's kind of like a mystery novel where you get a piece of the puzzle from the archaeologists, a piece of the puzzle from the dendrochronology people, maybe a piece of the puzzle from a senior citizen in town," said Dillon. "You put it all together and it helps you solve these historical mysteries. It really helps you look into the past."

Dillon expects that Parks will utilize the researchers' expertise again in the future, as there are more structures that need to be accurately dated.

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