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Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

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Centuries-old spruce hidden in N.B. forest

SACKVILLE, N.B. (CP)—Hidden in a dark gorge somewhere in the wilds of coastal New Brunswick stands a scrawny 445-year-old tree that researchers say is the world's oldest-known red spruce.

A team from Mount Allison University in Sackville estimate the spruce they found over the summer took root in 1560 — well before Champlain set foot in the New World and when Elizabeth I was the new queen of England.

The previous record was held by a 405-year-old tree in New Hampshire.

"It just has this magic feeling to it," says Ben Phillips, a geography and environmental studies student who stumbled on the old tree while working on a project.

"The last time I was in there I came down the hill just beside it and I recognized it right away. It is smaller but has this magical glow to it — a greenish-white glow to the bark."

Phillips spent the summer hunting down old red spruce trees for a project he's working on comparing the Fundy Basin fog forest with trees in the Caledonia Highlands.

Red spruce are only thought to have a lifespan of about 400 years, and Phillips had no idea the tree was as old as it is because it's smaller than others around it.

He took samples from several trees and a ring count later confirmed its record-breaking age.

"It was growing in the shade all its life," says Phillips. "It got out-competed in the short term, but in the long-term ... this one ended up living for 445 years."

Colin Laroque, a geography professor who heads the Mount Allison dendrochronology lab, said Phillips's discovery allows them to study the environment in the area 150 to 250 years further back than before.

"It is huge for our lab," he says. "Normally we find a 100- or 200-year-old tree, and that is spectacular. This tree suddenly doubles the length of time I can go back."

Phillips and Laroque won't say exactly where the tree is, revealing only that it is along the Bay of Fundy coast.

"If a lot of people become interested in it and start to hike to it, there is a chance the roots will get trampled down," says Phillips.

"I wouldn't want to jeopardize its existence because of something I did."

Laroque says several factors probably combined to save the tree.

"It's in a pretty dense, dark kind of gorge, which is pretty inaccessible," he says, noting it would be difficult for loggers to get to it.