SAVING THE UGLIEST DUCK-LIKE-THING

With a face and form only a mother could love, the platypus is so unusual, so fascinating—and so threatened. Scientists have yet to learn everything there is to know about this member of the monotreme family because they are so secretive. But will their secrecy lead to their demise?

What is That!

When first brought to Europe from their native Australia in 1799, most thought the platypus specimen was a fake or hoax like P.T. Barnum's FeeJee Mermaid. Who would have thought that a furry creature with a soft, leathery bill, flat tail, webbed feet with claws, and no teeth would exist! Eventually scientists would accept the platypus as a real living creature, but the fact that this mammal lays eggs would not be discovered until 1884.

I Want to be Left Alone!

Platypuses are very shy, obsessive-compulsive creatures, preferring a quiet, undisturbed, and orderly life. They live up and down the eastern part of Australia on the shores of rivers, lakes, and streams. Semi-aquatic, platypuses stay in their burrows for most of the day, and waddle out between dusk and dawn to hunt underwater for their food—crayfish, shrimp, tadpoles, and insect larvae. Platypuses have an innovative way to find food—they close their eyes and ears using a flap of skin, and rely on an electroreception system found in their bills to pick up electrical currents in the water!

Platypuses live alone in their burrows, but share a body of water among neighbors. In their natural habitat, platypuses breed for a few months out of the year; the female does not breed until she is about two years old, and in many instances she has a "puggle" or two only every other year. The young platypus leaves mother's burrow at about six months of age to go off and search for her own place—sometimes traveling quite far in order to find just the home that suits her, surrounded by the perfect flora and fauna materials for nests.

Dangers to the Platypus

Snakes, water rats, goannas, and foxes are the natural enemies of the platypus. Killed in the pursuit of scientific study in the 1800s and hunted in the early 1900s for their thick, water-resistant fur, Platypuses are now protected from humans. The Australian government has even issued a creed that these animals are not to be exported to other countries.

Like many other vulnerable species, the highest threat to the platypus is damage to their habitat. Illegal netting of fish, degradation of water bodies by damming, drainage, irrigation, pollution, and out-of-control algae growths, along with the destruction of natural plants around water courses, all reduce the suitable amount of neighborhoods in which platypus can live. If you are lucky enough to live in an area that is known for its wild platypus population, do not disturb them—they do not like human interference. Nor should you remove plants from the shores of their lakes, rivers, and streams—they help preserve their habitat. Platypuses are not considered endangered yet, but could be in the future if their habitat continues to be threatened.

Platypus in Captivity

Because platypuses are so particular and sensitive to noise and, moreover, to change, they traditionally do not adjust to captivity well.

Conservationists have gone to great lengths to ensure the platypuses' comfort and propagation of the species, but because of their particular nature, there have been just a handful of successful platypus births in captivity. Mr. David Fleay conducted the first successful captive breeding in 1944 at the Healesville Sanctuary in Victoria, Australia. The feat was so celebrated, the female puggle, Corrie, became an international celebrity and appeared on the cover of *The New York Times*. Mr. Fleay was able to perform the miracle twice more at that same facility in 1998 and 2000. The latest successful captive birth was performed in 2004 at Taronga Zoo in Sydney, Australia and resulted in female twins. To further the captive breeding program, the Healesville Sanctuary and the Taronga Zoo share breeding information and tips. They plan to become matchmakers and will eventually exchange one male platypus for a female platypus when the time is right for both.

THE FUTURE OF THE PLATYPUS

Platypuses have been on the Earth for many millennia—evedence of ancient platypus from 60 million years ago have been found in South America and Australia. They have evolved so much and are so perfectly suited for their environment that an argument arises when their future is discussed.

Consider natural selection, which is defined by **dictionary.com** as "a process in nature by which, according to Darwin's theory of evolution, only organisms best adapted to their environment tend to survive and transmit their genetic characteristics to succeeding generations while those less adapted tend to be eliminated." On the other end of the spectrum is human intervention that helps to preserve endangered species.

Will the platypus become an ideal example for Darwin's theory of natural selection and continue to adapt to its surroundings, or has it become so specialized that considerable changes in their environment will eventually lead to their extinction if humans do not intervene? Some feel that captive breeding and conservation programs save many animals from extinction. For example, the giant panda and the Cape fur seal have been saved using these methods. Other people take a different view on captive breeding—that this method adversely affects gene pools. In the case of the platypus, there is a concern that captive breeding could turn into a program for commercial gain-bidding wars among zoos that would pay top dollar for a prize platypus.

Given all that you know, do you think that captive breeding and conservation programs are for the good of the platypus, or will these acts of human intervention cause irreparable damage to this species known for its shy, unassuming ways?