Protecting the Platypus

It's cold at Camp Platypus. The residents of the makeshift encampment huddle, drink steaming cups of tea, and warm themselves over a wood fire.

It is here, along the Obi Obi Creek in Australia, that protesters are trying to stop builders from digging up a platypus habitat to build a supermarket. A habitat is the environment in which an animal lives.

For three years the protesters have battled with police, construction workers, and officials from the supermarket chain. In summer 2005 the situation grew more intense as workers began clearing the land.

"We're not moving until we save this place," protester John Woodlands told a reporter.

Odd Duck

Why all the fuss about the platypus? Although the platypus is far from rare, it lives only on the continent of Australia. The animal is an

1 makeshift: a temporary replacement
2 rare: uncommon, hard to find
endangered species and is protected under Australian law. It is also a weird-looking critter.

When European explorers reached Australia in the 1600s and 1700s, they first saw this animal with a furry coat, a duck-like bill, four webbed feet, and a flat tail like a paddle. The animal uses its front limbs for swimming. Its tail functions as a rudder.

The platypus acts like an amphibian, at home both on land and in the water. But the platypus is not an amphibian. It is a mammal. Mammals are warm-blooded animals. Most mammals, such as humans, produce milk. Specifically, the platypus is a mammal known as a monotreme. Unlike most mammals, monotremes lay eggs and provide milk to their young directly through the skin. Only two monotremes exist: the platypus and the echidna (ih-KID-nah), or spiny anteater.

The platypus lives along the banks of eastern Australia's lakes, rivers, ponds, and streams. It uses its bill and its nose to sniff out food at the bottom of the waterways. Its large, flat, furry tail stores fat for the long winters.

Pollution is killing off the species, and the construction of homes and commercial buildings is destroying its habitat.

**Construction Likely**

At Camp Platypus, protesters hope the supermarket chain will rethink its decision to build the store, but that appears to be unlikely. Construction has already been done.

Nevertheless, although the platypus is an odd-looking creature, it still has a lot of friends around the world.
Platypus Fast Facts

Scientific name: *Ornithorhynchus anatinus*

Habitat: Streams, rivers, and lakes near the east coast of Australia

Description: Short, dense dark-brown fur; 2-inch-wide bill; hairless, webbed feet; flat, furry tail; 1- to 2-foot-long body

Defense: Males have spurs on their hind feet that contain poisonous venom. The animal's sting can kill a dog.

Reproduction: Females generally lay two eggs at a time. Babies attach themselves to the fur under a mother's belly to drink her milk.
“Protecting the Platypus” Questions

__1. Based on John Woodlands’s words, we know that he is
   a. optimistic.
   b. appreciative.
   c. forgiving.
   d. determined.

__2. The people at Camp Platypus are willing to
   a. give in to the developers if necessary.
   b. give up comfort for a good cause.
   c. protect the platypus by keeping predators away.
   d. allow construction of homes but not commercial buildings.

__3. The Australian problem that most directly affects the welfare of the platypus is the
   a. lack of rainfall in the desert areas.
   b. fast growth of marketing corporations.
   c. pollution of streams, lakes and rivers.
   d. isolation of the west coast communities.

__4. What makes the platypus especially unusual is that although it is a mammal, it
   a. lays eggs.
   b. is a monotreme.
   c. depends heavily on a watery habitat.
   d. all of the above.

__5. What kinds of personal traits do people have who protest the building of supermarkets in order to save animals?
“Protecting the Platypus” Answer Sheet

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C 5. What kinds of personal traits do people have who to protest the building of supermarkets in order to save animals?

   Answers will vary but might include that these people are brave, love animals, care about the environment and speak up for what they think is right.

Suggested Additional Vocabulary: encampment, huddle, venom, chattiness