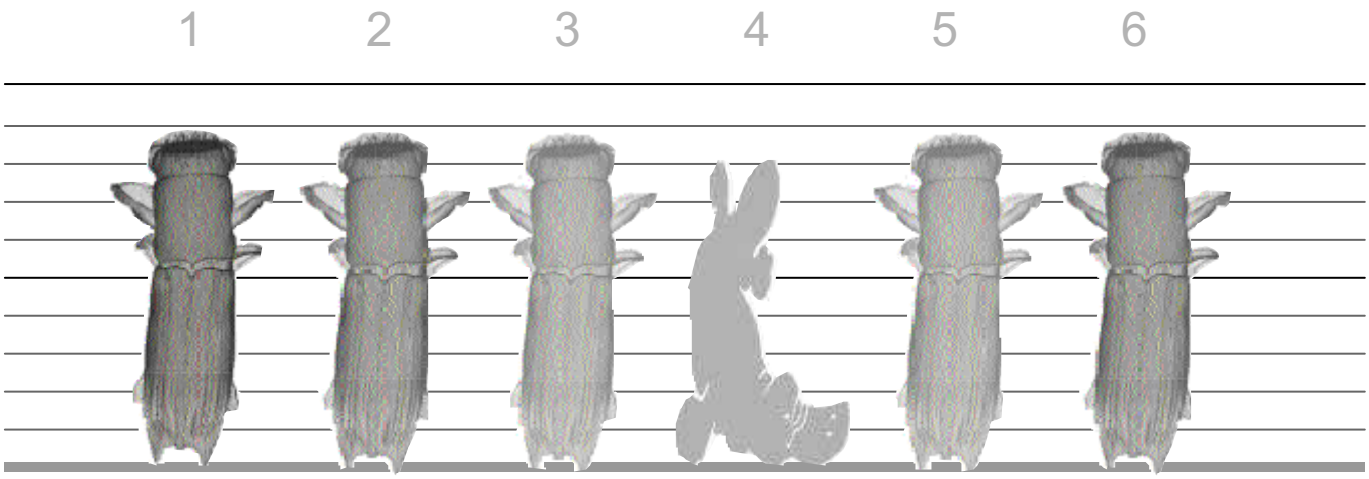
" Tonight, I will talk about the platypus"

At a management seminar held at the AFP College on May 7, 2002, Federal Agent **Luke Cornelius,** Director People Strategies, drew on his previously undisplayed knowledge of matters biological. While investigating the origins of what has become the AFP's corporate mascot, the platypus, he has discovered that there is a valuable lesson to be learned about corporate survival.

Federal Agent Luke Cornelius, Director People Strategies



–Would the real platypus please step forward.

First described in the scientific literature in 1793, this member of the order Coleoptera is a wood-boring beetle ubiquitous throughout the Americas, commonly known as the ambrosia beetle. This species was named for the Greek 'platypous', meaning 'flat-footed'.

The family Platypodidae includes about 1000 species, most of which are found in the tropics. These beetles may be regarded as highly successful in adaptive terms, given the diversity of the genus and its physiological stasis over geological time and over a wide range of environments.

What then of that other animal which has assumed the name of this adaptive creature?

Ornithorhynchus anatinus, first described in the literature as *Platypus anatinus* in 1799 (Shaw) lost 'platypus' in favour of the beetle on

account of its double naming with the beetle being discovered some years later. Because the beetle had this name first, in accordance with the laws of taxonomy, the Australian platypus had to be re-named.

By this time however, the name platypus had passed into the common literature as the name for the Australian platypus.

By contrast with the true platypus, the Australian version is the last of its kind. While the fossil record of the Ornithorhynchus is incomplete, with few specimens preserved, earliest forms of this genus have been dated to 130 million years ago, with the current form emerging about 2.5 million years ago.

There is a stark contrast here between the adaptive capacity of the beetle and our highly adapted platypus.

The Australian platypus, in comparative terms, is on its last legs. The species is confined to a shrinking number of waterways and in the face of increasing predation; this Australian icon is listed as vulnerable and is rightly the subject of active protection.

This is the animal our organisation has chosen as our mascot.

Now, I will not argue here that we should abandon our platypus in favour of a more robust and adaptive species, for example the dingo, because I think there are lessons for us to be drawn from our mascot's parlous state.

Note that earlier I drew a distinction between the beetle as highly adaptive and our platypus as highly adapted, so what is the difference?

A species is regarded as *adaptive* if its form allows it to survive in a wide range of environments – the more diverse, the more highly adaptive.

Species regarded as highly *adapted* are those which have reached a point in their adaptive specialisation where a change to the environment to which they have adapted would result in their rapid decline and extinction.

No doubt you all now realise that our platypus falls in the latter category.

This realisation is of significance to us because the sociopolitical niche occupied by the AFP has, for significant periods in our corporate history, fashioned our organisation to a degree of specialisation which has, at times, put our longer-term survival at risk.

The traditional policing structures built around specialised units, significant proportions of our budget being comprised of tied funding and rigid service/provider models which require market segmentation and specialisation are all drivers which limit our adaptive capacity.

It is very easy for a government, having grown tired of a law enforcement fad of past years, to cut the funding associated with it. The result of this is an immediate surplus capacity which cannot simply

be redirected to other priorities, because the funds which sustained that capacity have been withdrawn. The only course in that context is to shed that capacity through wholesale redundancy programs and by applying the brakes to recruitment. Sound familiar?

Many of you will recall the boom-bust cycles of growth and decline experienced by the AFP over the years. We all now live with the consequences of the last 'bust' (early to mid 90s), in terms of a significant hole in our workforce in the 6–10 year service cohort and an aging +10 year service cohort. This imbalance in our workforce, which originated in policy implemented about seven years ago, limits our adaptive capacity now, in terms of having sufficient staff with a broad enough range of skills to undertake current and emergent business.

In the face of this challenge however, we have been able to move to a more adaptive model.

For example, not without significant sacrifice, we have been able to rise to the challenges post September 11, 2001. We now effectively operate a third 'outcome' in the form of a counter terrorist capacity.

I attribute our success in this regard to the AFP reform program. Particularly over the past three years, the AFP has become more effective in marketing its services to government in terms of law enforcement capacity. A hallmark of this new approach has been our organisation's ability to market its adaptive capacity, rather than continuing with a more traditional focus on specialisation and segmentation.

However, the risk of us being driven back into a highly adapted niche remains.

Governments continue to tie funds to specific outputs, for example, people smuggling, Avian teams, operation Drava and the myriad outputs specified in the ACT policing agreement.

We should be cautious about contributing to the proliferation of tied funding outcomes by casting our New Policy Proposals in terms which seek that result and instead focus on marketing to government that resource which contributes the most to our adaptive capacity – our people. Such an approach will better equip us to meet challenges posed by criminal activity, no matter its nature, well into the future.

We should also be careful about how we shape our people in order to maximise our organisation's long-term adaptive capacity. Meeting short term requirements for people with particular language skills, or the ability to operate a particular widget, or the technical knowledge to counter a particular form of activity will not, of itself, equip us for the future. That approach is instead a recipe for short to medium term redundancy.

We therefore need to be very clear about those skills we ought to purchase off a shelf in order to meet immediate needs and those skills we should build into our existing workforce as a means of maximising its long-term adaptive capacity.

I conclude that a balanced approach to this problem lies in the environment. The only way we can ensure we have a deep enough reservoir of skills within our organisation to meet the challenges of tomorrow is to have a recruitment mix which reflects the community we are expected to serve.

If we can move the AFP to become an organisation, the composition of which mirrors the community, the more likely will be the prospects of our being able to find that wild card of survival in the face of a dynamic environment.

So it is that I return to – our mascot.

I have already alluded to the vast body of scientific literature which dismisses our platypus as an evolutionary novelty occupying the last twig of a near dead branch of evolutionary endeavour.

To some extent however, this view has been revised in recent times, owing to the discovery, in the mid eighties, that our platypus has, in effect, a sixth sense – electro sensory perception.

As it happens, the bill of the platypus is a highly sophisticated electro sensory detector which enables it to map out its environment by detecting the small electrical currents emitted by prey, and by water eddies.

This evolutionary wild card is an example of the sort of capacity which can give an organism an improved chance of survival in the face of increasing odds.

I note in the current 'blurb' which describes the platypus on the inside cover of our corporate magazine, we celebrate the obvious, a poisonous spur with which it can attack aggressors. This is not exactly the case. The spur is possessed, in adulthood, only by the male of the species and is principally used during the mating season.

Perhaps it's time, in light of the less obvious and more recent discovery, for us to revisit our description of the platypus and now highlight the one thing which might just pull our platypus through – an ability to see beyond the obvious and sense the environment to a degree which we can barely comprehend.