

Care of the West African Mud Turtle

Husbandry & Diet Information

Quick Facts about *Pelusios castaneus*

- Lifespan: 25 years average, 30-50 years under ideal conditions
- Shell length: 20-24 cm (8-9 in)
- Males are smaller than females with a bowl-shaped bottom shell and a thick tail. Females have a flat bottom shell and a thinner tail.

Natural History

These aquatic turtles are native to West Africa, spanning Senegal, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Togo, Benin, Lebanon, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Gabon, and Northern Angola. Their natural habitat consists of aquatic habitat like swamps, marshes, streams, and lagoons, surrounded by dense forest floors or submerged savannah.

Enclosure

Indoor housing: Hatchlings can be placed in a 10-gallon (38 L) tank. House one adult in a 20-40 gallon (75-150 L) tank or larger; use a 75-gallon (280 L) or larger if more than one turtle is housed together. The substrate should be half turf or gravel that slopes into a deep bed of water. Install a good water filter and perform frequent water changes. Offer half-logs or faux plants as basking areas and hiding spots.

Heat and lighting: Your turtle's setup should include a:

- Submersible heater - Ideally tank water temperature should range between 26-28°C (80-83°F) during the day and no lower than 24°C (76°F) at night.
- Full-spectrum (UVB) light - Full-spectrum lighting will help your turtle metabolize calcium, which is very important in all reptiles, especially young growing pets. UV basking lights also increase cage temperature.
- Tank thermometer – Monitor the tank's temperature gradient. The basking temperature should ideally range between 32-35°C (90-95°F).
- A hygrometer, which measures humidity, should read above 50% at all time and this should be easy to maintain given the amount of water in the tank.

Water quality: It is important to maintain optimal water quality for aquatic turtles. This should be managed with frequent water changes AND an appropriate filtration system. Filtration only removes suspended particles in the water and does not change the water quality by itself. At minimum, water changes should be done once every 2 weeks, removing half the existing water column and replacing it with fresh water. Perform whole water changes monthly.

It is highly recommended that water be tested for ammonium, nitrate, nitrite, dissolved oxygen,

phosphate, and pH content. Test strips are widely available and can be found at commercial pet stores. The ideal parameters for your pet turtle should be: ammonium (< 0.05mg/L, zero is better), nitrate (< 0.3mg/L), and dissolved oxygen (> 6 ppm). Nitrite and phosphate should both be zero. pH can vary, but between 6.8 to 7 is adequate. Beware of new gravel, as it serves as a buffer and can change the pH of the water. High ammonium levels in the water have been associated with skin disease in aquatic turtles.

Habitat Shopping List

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Large aquarium | <input type="checkbox"/> Large, polished stones |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aquarium filter | <input type="checkbox"/> Full-spectrum (UVB) light |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aquarium heater | <input type="checkbox"/> Light hood |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clamp lamps, preferably with a dimmer switch | <input type="checkbox"/> Air thermometer |

Diet

The natural diet of the mud turtle is plant and animal based. Younger aquatic turtles have more of a meat-based diet. As an adult, they eat more vegetation (80%) than meat (20%).

- The vegetable part of their diet mainly includes romaine lettuce, dandelion greens, turnip greens, mustard greens, collard greens, red-leaf lettuce, dill, parsley, endive, escarole, carrot tops, and other dark leafy greens. Avoid large quantities of kale and spinach as they may bind calcium and could prevent its absorption. The appropriate reptile salad will ensure the proper amount of vitamins and minerals needed to prevent deficiencies.
- The meat-based part of their diet can include small sections of cut out earthworms, mealworms, crickets, water fleas, krill, trout chow and even small feeder fish (minnows). Aquatic turtle pellets can be given to young aquatic turtles, but should only be given as a supplement to adults.
- A berry or two can be offered as a treat.
- Dust the worms with a calcium powder containing vitamin D3.
- A vitamin supplement can also be mixed with food to boost vitamin A levels.

Any changes in appetite and defecation should be noted and you should call the veterinarian.

Common Problems

Any changes in appetite and defecation should be noted and you should call the veterinarian. Common problems include:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hypocalcemia and metabolic bone disease• Kidney disease• Respiratory disease• Dehydration• Dystocia (egg bound females) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eye lesions• Poor diet• Constipation• Aggression between housed males• Skin disease |
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