

Care of the Sulcata or African Spurred Tortoise

Husbandry & Diet Information

Quick Facts about *Geochelone sulcata*

- Lifespan: average 50-80 years, up to 150 years
- Average weight: females 39 kg (85 lb); males up to 50 kg (110 lb)
- Shell length: Up to 0.8 m (2.5 ft)

Natural History

These “gentle giants” are found throughout the southern edge of the Sahara in Africa. Sulcata tortoises inhabit environments that include hot arid desert, scrublands, and savannah. These tortoises DO NOT hibernate.

Reproduction

Sulcata tortoises reach sexual maturity at approximately 5 years of age, when they reach 11-18 kg (25-40 lb). This species breeds very well in captivity. When breeding occurs, a female may lay up to 6 clutches a year and 15-20 egg clutches are deposited. Eggs should be kept in vermiculite at 30°C (86°F) at 70%-80% humidity, hatchlings arise after 85-100 days incubation.

Enclosure

We strongly advise ADULTS BE HOUSED OUTSIDE for their health and due to their sheer size.

Outdoor housing: Outdoor enclosures provided during warm weather months should be protected from predators and heavily planted with small ornamental scrubs and trees. Enclosures should also include rocky hiding places as well as additional shade areas.

The Sulcata tortoise is a “true-burrowing” species, so it is essential to secure their outdoor environment as this strong species can EASILY tunnel and escape enclosures. Secure fencing is vital.

The temperature range at all times should be 27-29°C (80-85°F) in the daytime with a basking site at 32-35°C (90-95°F). At night, temperature should drop below approximately 24°C (75°F). During cold weather, outdoor pens for winter should include heated housing, with the pen elevated off of the ground. Farrowing heating pads (pig blankets) and ceramic heaters suspended from ceilings also help maintain warm temperatures.

Indoor housing: For hatchlings a 40-75 gallon (150-280 L) tank or 1.2 m x 0.6 m (4ft by 2 ft) area is appropriate. Indoor enclosures should replicate their natural habit. There should be an under the tank heater, heat lamps, and UVB lighting (full spectrum). Please MAKE SURE you have a UVB light. The substrate should be a soil/peat mixture, cypress mulch or piece of lawn. Avoid bark, sand, millet, walnut shells, or any substrate that is small enough to be ingested, as MANY reptiles present with substrate impactions. A temporary or overwintering indoor enclosure for adults can be assembled with a large area 2.4 m x 3 m (8 ft x 10 ft) tarp-covered floor, with hay shavings about 2 inches deep laid as substrate. Like a horse stall, the substrate should be shucked frequently to ensure a clean environment. A shallow bowl of water should be in the enclosure (larger enough for them to soak in). Please soak them in a shallow bowl of warm water twice a week for 10 minutes. This encourages drinking and defecation.

Diet

The sulcata tortoise requires a high fiber diet consisting mainly of broad leafy weeds and grass hay such as timothy hay and

orchard grass hay. Other vegetables offered include clover, plantain weeds, sow thistle, dandelions, and spineless Opuntia cactus pads.

Supplement this grass and weed diet with dark, leafy greens high in calcium and in vitamins A and vitamin C such as dandelion greens, collard greens, turnip greens, mustard greens, romaine, escarole, endive, and red leaf lettuce. Limit fruits and vegetables high in moisture. These guys like petals and blossoms as well, so try hibiscus, clover, dandelion, and grape leaves (pesticide and herbicide free). Avoid a lot of kale and spinach, as it binds up their nutritional calcium. Iceberg lettuce does NOT contain the nutrition they needs.

Dust vegetables with a calcium powder containing vitamin D3. A vitamin supplement can also be mixed with food to boost vitamin A levels.

Fresh water should be available at all times.

Common Problems

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

- Hypocalcemia and metabolic bone disease
- Bladder stones
- Respiratory disease
- Dehydration
- Eye lesions
- Poor diet
- Constipation
- Pyramiding

References

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Stewart T. Sulcata tortoise care sheet. Reptiles Web site. 2003. Available at <http://www.reptilesmagazine.com/Care-Sheets/Sulcata-Tortoise/>. Accessed March 22, 2015.