



## Aquatic Turtle Care

### INTRODUCTION

There are a huge variety of aquatic turtles kept as pets. Red-eared and Yellow-bellied Sliders are the most common. Depending on the species of turtle, their adult size can vary greatly. Most of these aquatic turtles can live for well over 50 years if given the proper care.

### HOUSING

#### **Cage**

Aquatic turtles need a lot of space. Their enclosure needs a swimming area and a basking area. The general rule of thumb is 10 gallons or 1.5-2 inches of swimming space for each inch of your turtle's shell length. A 5 inch turtle needs about 50 gallons of swimming space and adult turtles often require over 100 gallons of swimming space. Smaller/juvenile turtles can be housed in aquariums or large plastic bins, but due to the extreme space requirements, many people create indoor/outdoor pond set-ups for their adult turtles.

#### **Water**

**Substrate** – No substrate is necessary. Sand, gravel, and small rocks are hard to clean and can cause an intestinal obstruction/impaction if your turtle ingests the substrate. Easy to clean large rocks and artificial plants may be used for decoration. Stay away from rough rocks as they can scratch your turtle's shell and make them susceptible to bacterial and function infections

**Temperature** – Water temperature should be kept between 75-85°F. A pre-calibrated submersible heater may be used. An aquarium thermometer should be used to monitor the temperature regularly. If the temperature is too cold, your turtle may not eat.

**Filtration** – A filtration system is necessary to keep the water fresh between cleanings. The more powerful the filter, the less frequent you will have to clean the water. Turtles are much messier than fish and other aquatic pets, so you should purchase a filter that is intended for a system several times larger than the size of your turtle's enclosure.

#### **Basking Area**

Your turtle must be able to get entirely out of the water and dry off in its basking area. There are commercial products such as basking docks and islands that can be used for smaller turtles. For larger turtles, you may have to design your own basking area with Plexiglas or floating/anchored rock rafts or logs. Many turtle owners have "above tank basking areas" to help maximize space. Examples can be seen online.

**Temperature** – The temperature of the basking area should be around 85-90°F. An incandescent bulb, ceramic bulb, or other heating elements can be used. A digital thermometer probe should be used to monitor the temperature of the basking area.

**Lighting** – It is imperative that a UVB light source be provided for proper Vitamin D production and calcium absorption. The bulb should be within 18 inches of your turtle with no glass/plastic in between as the

glass/plastic can block emission. The light needs to be replaced every 6 months even if it still works as UVB production decreases over time. During the warmer months, you may take your turtle outdoors to bask in the sun. Do NOT leave your pet in a closed container/tank due to risk of overheating. Do not leave your turtle unsupervised due to the risk of escaping and predators.

### **CLEANING**

Turtles are very messy and their excess food, waste, and shed quickly builds up in the environment. Keeping their enclosure clean is important in preventing diseases.

**Water change** – A 50% water change should be done 1-2 times a week and the entire tank changed every 1-2 months. A siphon system can be used for the water changes. Remove your turtle from the tank and place in a safe location (small tub or similar). The aquarium and all of the contents/substrate should be scrubbed with soapy water. Make sure to rinse everything off thoroughly several times with fresh water before replacing.

### **FEEDING**

Turtles can be fed in a separate container of water to help keep their main enclosure cleaner.

**Commercial Diet (<25% of diet)** – Commercial turtle food comes in floating pellets, sticks, or tablets. They are formulated specifically for reptiles and have the advantage of not breaking up in water as fast as other foods. Rotating brands and types of commercial diets will help your turtle get a varied diet.

**Vegetables (>50% of diet)** – Offer leafy greens (collards, dandelion greens, mustard greens, kale, endive and escarole), shredded carrots, red bell pepper, cooked sweet potato, and squash several times a week. Make sure to remove uneaten greens in a timely fashion to prevent them from rotting. There are edible aquatic plants sold at aquarium stores as well.

**Treats (<10% of diet)** – Fruit such as shredded apples and melons or chopped up berries can be offered in small amounts. Live feeder fish, store-bought earthworms, and crickets can be offered occasionally.

### **HANDLING**

Support your turtle with both hands when you pick it up. Your turtle will feel more secure with something supporting their feet rather than “swimming” in the air.

**Salmonellosis** – Reptiles are commonly carriers of Salmonella and are a potential source of infection to humans. We recommend washing your hands immediately after handling your turtle or after coming into contact with fecal material.

### **HEALTH CARE**

We recommend a complete physical exam and fecal by an exotic animal veterinarian for all newly acquired pet turtles. Thereafter, we recommend annual exams and yearly cultures and fecal exams.

### **COMMON MEDICAL PROBLEMS**

**Abscess** – Abscesses appear as firm lumps on your turtle. They will need to be lanced and some need to be surgically removed. Ear abscesses are common in turtles and appear as a large swelling right behind the eye.

**Vitamin A Deficiency** – This commonly occurs due to an inappropriate diet. Symptoms include decreased appetite, swelling of the eyelids and ear, and respiratory infections.

**Respiratory Infection** – These are often secondary to Vitamin A deficiency. Symptoms include decreased appetite, lethargy, bubbles or mucous in the mouth, nasal discharge, wheezing, open mouth breathing, and gasping. If left untreated, a respiratory infection can lead to pneumonia.

**Shell Rot** – This is a shell infection that is often secondary to some sort of trauma, burn, or bite. The infection can penetrate deep into the shell and cause deformity of the shell.