

KEEPING WATER TURTLES IN AN AQUARIUM

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GENERAL:

There are many varieties of water turtles. Turtles are long lived, cold-blooded reptiles (exotic pets) that require specific care and attention to keep them healthy. The care of water turtles is complex. Before you obtain your pet turtle, you should acquaint yourself with its care requirements and have its living quarters prepared. Acquiring an animal as a pet and not caring for it properly is a crime in most localities. This care sheet has been prepared to assist you in providing proper care and maintenance of your turtle. You will need to do further study if you acquire some of the more exotic aquatic turtles. By choosing species from climates similar to your own you will find it easier to care for your pet.

NATURAL HABITAT:

To better understand the environment to keep you must provide to keep your turtle healthy and thriving, it is best to first understand their natural habitat. Water Turtles, often called Sliders, are turtles adapted to living in the water. Common across North America, they are often found in lakes and rivers of the mid-south and beyond. They are often seen basking on limbs and rocks, but as you approach they will feel threatened and quickly "slide" into the water.



THE COMMON RED-EARED SLIDER

They will live in water most of their lives, coming out to bask in sunlight, lay eggs in the nearby sand or dirt, and sometimes to search out a better water sight. Sunlight is critical to their health, because the ultraviolet ray (UVB) in sunlight is needed to allow the metabolism of vitamins and minerals. Their diet natural diet consists of live worms, crickets, crayfish, and pond fish. They will occasionally feed on water plants. Water turtle must be in water to eat properly. Feeding can be supplemented with veterinary grade pellets. Sunlight (UVB) is critical to their health and development.

The shell length of a full-grown male water turtle rarely exceeds 8 to 9 inches. Females' shells can grow to a length of 12 to 14 inches.

Water turtles seem to enjoy being with other water turtles, and have a "language" of head jerks, a quick flickering of their front feet, and even an occasional nip. But they are totally capable of living healthy and happy lives on their own. Please be prepared to make a long-term commitment, since some water turtles can live to be 40 to 60 years old. Many Red-Eared Sliders live to the age of 20 or more.

CREATING A "HOME" FOR YOUR TURTLE:

They can make interesting pets but require a great deal of care to keep them healthy. This includes extensive water and temperature management, proper diet selection, and cleaning and maintaining large filters and pumping systems.

Usually sold at pet stores and amusement parks at a cute 4" inch size, most owners have not researched the amount of care these turtles require. The popular Red-Eared Slider can reach 10 pounds and 13" in diameter and one adult would require an environment of over 120 gallons (an aquarium 5 to 6 feet in length.)

This care-sheet will provide some basic guidelines to help ensure that your water turtles live long and healthy life in an indoor aquarium. For **outdoor guidelines** on the care of hardy water turtles such as sliders, cooters and painted turtles in the mild southern California climate, see our website at www.sdturtle.org/public_documents/SDTTS_OutdoorWaterTurtleCareSheet.pdf

Turtles that are not native to the U.S., and from areas with more severe climates, may have special needs.

Please read the FDA Warning on Salmonella on our website. Children handling water turtles as pets could be susceptible to getting Salmonella. Always wash thoroughly after handling water turtles or working on their environment. Link:

www.sdturtle.org/public_documents/FDASalmonellaWarning.pdf

THE AQUARIUM

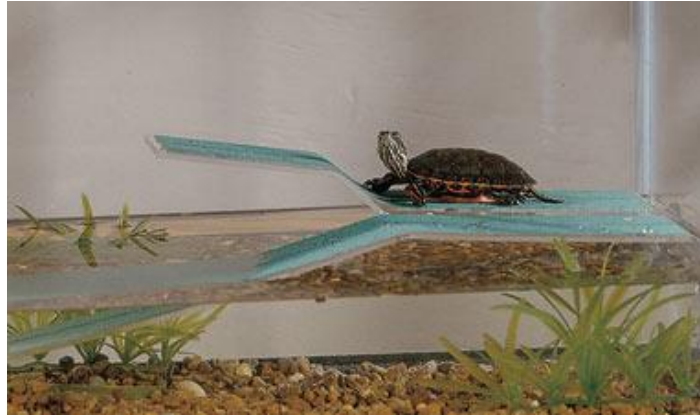
An aquarium is not an ideal home for your water turtle. While adequate for a juvenile, adults would better in an outdoor pond. But sometimes an aquarium may be the only option. Your turtle aquarium will be one-half to two-thirds full of water. So an 80 gallon aquarium would be used to hold 40 to 50 gallons of water. A dry platform above or over the water, large enough for your turtle(s) to climb completely out of the water, will be needed to create a "basking spot." The entire tank should be securely covered so there is no way for the turtle to try to climb out and fall to the floor. And to keep that curious cat or dog out!

The **MINIMUM** amount of water in your aquarium would be **FIVE TIMES** the length and width of your turtle. For example, a turtle with a 10" shell length would need a tank at least 50" long. And if that turtle was 3" high at the tallest point – the water depth would be a minimum of 15". Those are minimums. If you have more than one turtle, then you need an even larger aquarium.

TEMPERATURE

Turtles become sluggish as temperatures drop and they stop eating. The correct water temperature for your specific type of turtle will be determined by when it eats well but is not overactive. This is usually between 70 degrees F and 85 degrees F. For most aquariums, this will be above room temperature and your tank will require a heat source. Large tanks and outdoor ponds require filtration systems to clean and aerate the water. Add room temperature water when setting up or adding water. The temperature of shallow ponds or small aquariums must be checked frequently to avoid overheating or extreme cooling. Larger volumes of water are more forgiving in avoiding overheating.

Your basking spot should be just above the highest water level and may need a ramp or some steps in the water to help the turtle get up to the dry spot. Because your turtle will not be basking in outdoor sunlight each day, you will need to buy a 5.0 or 8.0 UVB bulb and a heat bulb to keep the basking spot between 90 and 105 degrees. Always check your setup with a thermometer. While you are at the pet store buying your thermometer, get a timer for your lights and set them for a twelve hour on/off cycle to mimic a normal outdoor day.



Example of a dry basking platform. Should be under a heat lamp.

WATER QUALITY AND FILTERS

Water quality is critical to the health of your turtle. Harsh chlorinated water needs to be treated when added to your tank. You may need to get an algae treatment for the water if that occurs in your water. Turtles generate much more waste than fish, so keeping your water fresh and filtered is critical to preventing respiratory problems, skin infections and shell rot in your turtle. Plan on replacing about half of the water in your tank every two to three weeks.

There are two basic aquarium filtration systems, mechanical and biological filtration. The mechanical filter is composed of layers of foam, sand or diatomaceous earth to capture solid wastes before biological filtration. Biological filtration refers to the use of microorganisms to remove ammonia, nitrates, and break down dissolved organic solids. Most commercial aquarium filter units have both foam sponges (mechanical filter) and carbon/organic (biologic) filters.

To handle the large volume of waste your turtle will generate, you must select a filter rated **THREE TIMES** the size of your aquarium. So if you have 100 gallons in your aquarium, you will need a filter rated for 300 gallons. After you start filtering your aquarium, you should see crystal clear water all the time. If the water is murky or cloudy, or green, or you see skin and waste particles continuously floating around in the tank, then you have selected too small a filter unit and will need to buy an additional filter. Completely clean out your filter(s) and rinse or replace all filter media once between each of your half-tank water replacements according to the filter manufacturer's instructions.

FEEDING

Most aquatic turtles tend to be predators and opportunistic omnivores (they eat whatever they can get.) Water turtles must eat in the water but they do not need to be fed every day. A feeding schedule of 3-4 times a week is sufficient although daily access to water hyacinths (a common water plant) will not be a problem. Turtles can be messy eaters, so it is highly recommended that you feed your turtle outside the aquarium to keep the water from loading up with food scraps.

Turtle pellets found in better pet stores (made by ZooMed, Zilla, RepCal, and Tetramin) have been improved on over the years and these manufacturers strive to provide a balanced diet for your turtle. Pellets can make up about half of your menu, but never feed your turtle just pellets. Rotate the brand of pellets you buy (for better balance.) The other half of your menu should be divided between meat and greens. Include some live food (feeder fish, meal worms, and super worms) or frozen shrimp or krill. Add aquarium greens, endive, romaine lettuce, spinach, mustard greens, and Chinese cabbage. All foods should be cut or chopped to a size that can be swallowed easily. Variety in the diet is the key to a healthy diet.

You should never over-feed your turtle. Try feeding an amount that can be consumed in about 10 minutes. Adult turtles can be fed every other day.

SEXING

It is very difficult to determine the sex of young turtles, but in adults it is often quite simple. Males usually have long, tapered tails, which are thick at the base, and in some species, the front nails are very long. The male is usually smaller than the female and the cloacal opening is beyond the margin of the carapace. The female has a short stubby tail, short nails and her cloacal opening is close to the base of the tail.

Please keep males and females separated. There are nearly one hundred water turtles abandoned to the Society every month and they all need homes. The last thing we need is for owners to be breeding more water turtles.

In fact, it is illegal to engage in the trade of water turtle until they reach a size of 4 inches or more.

AILMENTS

A turtle kept under the proper conditions described above (UVB light, proper water and basking temperature ranges, balanced diet, crystal clear water) will seldom get sick. A healthy turtle should feel heavy for its size, have bright clear eyes and eat well. You should not introduce a new turtle into your healthy turtle(s)' tank. It should be quarantined and if you call us we can describe how to keep the new turtle in an antibiotic solution for five days.

If a turtle's behavior changes (lethargic, nervous, not eating), a loss of balance in the water (listing), the shell or skin texture and color changes, or the eyes or ears appear congested, it must be isolated from other turtles and veterinary treatment started.

Your vet can help you recheck your turtle set-up:

- Drastic nightly temperature drops unlike what the turtle is accustomed to?
- Lack of variety and nutrients in its diet?
- Unclean living conditions?
- Habitat too small?
- Lack of proper heat source?
- Lack of correct UVB lighting?

DANGERS

Water turtles are not able to completely close up like other turtles. They are prey to any meat eating predator such as dogs, cats, raccoons, etc. The Society gets calls all the time from families who must take their turtle to the reptile veterinarian after being mauled by the friendly pet dog that had tolerated the turtle for a year or more, and then finally decided to see "what's inside." Always keep your turtle away from other animals and keep them securely covered when in their tank.



Hefty and Wimpy in author's aquarium.