

TORTOISES IN CAPTIVITY

In Southern Africa and especially in the Western Cape, we're blessed with the richest diversity of tortoises in the world, ranging from the endangered geometric tortoise to the common angulate tortoise. As a result, many of these creatures end up in captivity when people pick them up from the side of the road. Some tortoises are found wandering in the suburbs as escaped pets and there are numerous cases of buyers discovering their new homes come complete with tortoise!

It's important to remember that, as with any South African bird, reptile or mammal, you may not capture, transport or keep tortoises in captivity without relevant permits. You also may not release a tortoise back into the wild without permission from Nature Conservation, as the animal risks being released into the wrong environment, or the captive animal may bring disease into a susceptible wild population. If you have a tortoise without a permit, contact Nature Conservation to obtain the necessary. As with any pet animal, you should always find out as much as possible about care and diet in captivity. Most medical problems associated with tortoises are as a direct result of incorrect husbandry. Many tortoise species don't thrive in captivity and shouldn't be kept. Only the angulate tortoise and the large leopard tortoise should be kept, as they adapt well to captive environments.

Tortoises should be kept in an area with both grass and sand. The enclosure should be sunny and well drained to prevent damp, cold conditions in winter. Shelter should be provided - low dense bushes and/or man-made shelters. Tortoises prefer a cosy fit, so don't make the shelter too big. It's advisable to keep the tortoises in a special enclosure to keep them in and the family dog(s) out! Some dogs view tortoises as mobile chewy toys, and their bites can be fatal. Tortoises can also dig well and a solid barrier such as wood or a sunken vibracrete slab will prevent escapes by digging, as well as providing no grip for climbing. Mesh fencing can lead to injuries to the limbs and head if not lined with a smooth, solid material at ground level.

Fresh water should always be available - they often soil the water! Make sure the water container is not too deep and that even the smallest tortoise in the enclosure can climb out if it should fall in accidentally. The diet should be varied, consisting of all kinds of fruit and vegetables, chopped or grated for smaller tortoises. A balanced diet typically includes: cucumber, cabbage, brussel sprouts, carrots, asparagus, waterblommetjies, alfalfa, tomatoes, spinach, apples, pears, strawberries, mangoes and melons. Avoid avocados and remember that only five percent of the diet should be fruit. Also important are various plants from the garden including grass, gazanias, dandelions, nasturtiums, impatience and chickweed. Some tortoises eat millipedes and snails too. Don't feed too much lettuce as it has little nutritional value and is better used as a small part of a mixed fruit and vegetable salad that can be stored in the fridge for a few days.

A vitamin and mineral supplement powder should be sprinkled lightly over the food twice a week. An example of these would be Beefee powder, or Cani-Cal available at TAH. Be careful not to overdo the supplementation, as this could lead to other problems. A good diet will lead to healthy animals with strong immune systems. Most diseases are associated with poor diet or incorrect housing, especially damp, cold enclosures in winter leading to respiratory infections. Dog bite wounds and other causes of shell trauma are common in summer.

Tortoises may carry salmonella bacteria, which cause diarrhoea and other serious diseases in people, so make sure you wash your hands after handling them. Do not handle them too often, as this may result in dehydration. Under ideal conditions, tortoises will breed in captivity. Females will dig holes in well-drained soil in sunny areas to lay eggs. Angulate tortoises usually lay a single egg per clutch several times during the breeding season. Leopard tortoises lay several clutches containing 5-16 eggs. The eggs may take from three to 14 months to hatch!

Tortoises make great pets if cared for properly and become very tame. Don't remove them from the wild as they are often available on permit from other keepers, through the Cape Reptile Club or local zoos. Look after your tortoises well and they'll give you great pleasure for many years!

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