

Australian Turtle Care



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INTRODUCTION

If you are planning on getting a pet turtle, or you already have one but want to brush up on your turtle care skills, this manual will guide you in ensuring they live a long healthy and happy life. By far the most popular turtles are the Murray short neck turtle as they make wonderful pets for the whole family to enjoy! Whilst turtles are fantastic for both first time owners and seasoned professionals, there are several factors you should take into account when looking for your new friend to ensure they will stay happy and healthy.

THE BASICS

Murray short neck turtles can grow up to 30 cm in size, meaning your pint sized critter will become a larger than life housemate in no time! Terrapin or Penny turtle are names given to young turtles (hatchlings) in the sixties and seventies due to their small size when hatched. However, this is just a name and all turtles will eventually grow; there is no such thing as a turtle that stays small! Additionally, turtles are well known for living from anywhere between forty and fifty years or even longer and may very well just be the longest friend you ever have!

HOUSING

Glass aquariums or terrariums are the most practical form of housing for turtles as they are simple to clean and make it easy for you to watch your new friend playing in his home. For the first 9-12 months of a turtle's life, a 2 foot (60cm) tank is adequate, however, after this you will need to upgrade to a 4 foot (120cm) tank to ensure your turtle has enough space to keep growing. If you have two turtles a 5 or 6 foot (150-180cm) tank is recommended as this allows enough space for both turtles to grow whilst also providing plenty of space for them to have an area to themselves when they need it.

TIP – As your turtle gets older we recommend that the enclosure should have a width of 18 inches (45cm) so they have ample move to turn and move around freely.

ULTRA VIOLET LIGHT

Turtles kept indoors require Ultraviolet light (UVB) and a source of calcium usually in the form of a block. This UVB Light stimulates the production of vitamin D3 in a turtle's system so that they can absorb the calcium provided in their water. This ensures your turtle's shell remains hard and healthy. Most commonly UVB lights come in a T8 Fluorescent Tube and normally have a lifespan of 12 months. Remember to buy a brand new UVB tube every year. These UVB tubes are available in 3 strengths. 2.0, 5.0 and 10.0. If you are keeping a juvenile turtle the 5.0 or 10.0 must be used. Aquarium florescent tubes, older UV tubes and 2.0 tubes DO NOT have any beneficial UV for your turtle.

TIP - Ultraviolet light does not travel through glass. The UV light must reach the turtle uninterrupted and within 45cm and 30cm.

HEATING

Did you know that turtles are ectothermic? This means they rely on external sources to control their body temperature, such as sunlight or a heated surface. As a result, your turtle will need a thermostatically controlled aquarium heater to keep their water at a comfy 24 degrees and a heat lamp over their turtle dock. Some people say that the overhead heat lamp is not necessary however at Waterlife, we believe it is definitely a benefit for your turtle.

TURTLE DOCK

Turtles are not totally aquatic animals and therefore they do come out of the water from time to time. A Turtle docking area is vital to your turtle's ability to regulate its own temperature as well as providing your turtle with a resting place where it can breathe. As turtles have lungs like humans, and not gills, your turtle could drown without a turtle dock!

FILTRATION

Turtles will create waste like any other reptile and therefore a Filter is necessary. Before choosing a filter, firstly you need to decide how much work you are prepared to do. If you are happy to spend 15-20 minutes per week removing half of the water and cleaning the enclosure, an Internal Power Filter would be adequate. If low maintenance is what you are after you can't go past installing a Canister Filter.

TIP - Place your turtle tank away from direct sunlight to prevent algae growth on the glass.

TANKMATES

Whilst it is true that any fish you place in the same tank as your turtle may end up becoming turtle food, there are many species that will grow too large for the turtle to eat or are very good at evading the turtle, making for good tank mates. The benefits of keeping fish with turtles include a more vibrant tank alongside a cleaner environment as the fish will eat any left-over food otherwise left messily at the bottom of the tank.

Some of these species include Plecostomus and Bristlenose Catfish, which can grow quite large and will eat any algae that grows in the tank, or American Cichlid varieties which also grow big and are able to stand their ground against a turtle. Other large fish which may be compatible with turtles include larger Gouramis, Sharks (Silver, Red Tailed and Rainbows) and Silver dollars.

When choosing fish to keep with your turtles, keep in mind that juveniles raised with fish are less likely to be aggressive to them as they grow older. Similarly, turtles may still attempt to eat the fish despite efforts to keep them together peacefully. Goldfish and large, extremely aggressive fish are not suitable tank mates as they will harass and harm your turtle.

TIP - if choosing to keep turtles and fish together upgrade your filter to a larger model to combat the added waste from the fish and keep ammonia levels from rising.

TANK MAINTENANCE

It is essential you maintain the water quality of your tank in order for your turtle to remain healthy. Poor water quality can result in a sick turtle! Generally poor water quality is caused by overfeeding, lack of regular water changes and not using the recommended water treatments. To keep a turtle healthy you must maintain a stable pH around 7.0, a General Hardness (mineral Level) of around 200ppm (parts per million) and minimal ammonia which is the turtle's waste. To help maintain the water quality, we recommend using a Gravel Vac and removing 25% of the tank water weekly unless you are using a Canister Filter and the water changes will be less frequent. When filling the turtle enclosure with water you should use Chlorine Neutraliser and Turtle Conditioning Salts as a bare minimum. BioActive8 can also be used to add live bacteria which helps in breaking down excess waste in the form of ammonia and a Buffer Powder (Tropical Balance) can be used to keep the pH level at 7.0. A good practice is to use Aquarium Test Kits to observe the water quality levels so you can adjust them before the water deteriorates.

DIET

Turtles are omnivores and feed on a variety of food stuffs. Their staple food is a nutritionally balanced pellet and frozen food meat and vegetable based diet. At Waterlife, our turtles are fed both pellets and Fish Fuel's frozen Baby Turtle Food. Extra food items can be fed including crickets, mealworms, live feeder fish and a large variety of veggies.

TIP - Varying your turtle's diet ensures they have access to all the important nutrients their body needs!

Hatchling turtles should be fed as much as they can consume in about 5 minutes most days, whilst juveniles and adults should be offered food less frequently. Waiting between feeds allows turtles to digest their food properly as their metabolisms are slow which means food takes longer to pass through their digestive systems. If you have more than one turtle we recommend feeding them separately so they both get enough food, this could be achieved by putting each of them in a separate small enclosure/tank which has a small amount of tank water.

This will prevent turtles fighting over the food and makes monitoring their food consumption easier. Likewise, this reduces the amount of ammonia that builds up in your turtle tank, keeping it cleaner.

TOXIC TO YOUR TURTLE

Be careful with what you feed your turtles. Certain food products can be poisonous, so if you are unsure it's best not to offer it at all! Some examples include chocolate, dairy, avocado, caffeine, processed foods and many indoor and outdoor plants. Likewise, we recommend only feeding fresh food to your turtles and removing any left-over food items that your turtle hasn't eaten.

Suitable fruits and veggies include but are not limited to carrots, corn, peas, spinach leaves and bananas.

HEALTH CARE

Observe carefully what your turtle is eating so you will be aware if he loses his appetite. This could be a sign of poor water quality. Establish a pattern of what a healthy turtle looks like so that you can more easily pick up when your turtle's actions are different. However, most problems originate from poor or incorrect tank maintenance and hygiene.

Soft Shell – Caused by no UVB light and a lack of Calcium.

Fungus or Skin Infection – Normally caused by Chlorine burn, low pH acidic water and ammonia.

Loss of weight - Normally nutritional deficiencies caused by the wrong food lacking the correct nutrition.

Swollen Eyes – Caused by poor water conditions.

IN SUMMARY

Turtles have been extremely popular as pets overseas for many years and the popularity is growing quickly in Australia. They make a fantastic pet especially for kids as they teach them responsible pet ownership. Given the correct conditions your new pet turtle will thrive in captivity giving them hours of fun and enjoyment.