

CARE SHEET FOR SULCATA TORTOISES

Giant African spurred tortoise / Sulcata (GEOCHELONE SULCATA)



Above: Adult sulcatas drinking.

Origins

Sulcatas are found within a belt along the south of the Sahara desert. Their native countries are Ethiopia, Senegal, Mali, Chad, Sudan, Niger and Mauntania.

The terrain they live in is harsh, baron desert scrub land. The climate in such countries is very hot and dry, day time temperatures often reaching 35-40C, far too hot for normal daytime activity. These tortoises spend much of their time below ground in large excavated burrows where the constant micro climate habitat protects them.

Night time temperatures can also drop quite dramatically in such locations, at certain times of the year external temperatures may drop as low as freezing. Again the micro climate of the animal's burrow remains quite constant.

Rainfall levels are also extremely low, and sulcata tortoises often endure long periods of time without access to water, a feat these animals are well adapted for.

Description

This is a very large tortoise, and is the largest continental land tortoise in the world. Adults can reach as much as 80cm in length and weigh in at over 100kg. This is not a species to be taken lightly!

Males are much larger than females. Average male length 60cm, weight 40-50kg. Average female length 40cm, weight 30-40kg.

The colouration of adult animals is generally an overall tan/brown colour. Young animals often have a chocolate brown carapace and pale tan coloured plastron. Skin colour can be pale, creamy yellow to sandy brown.

Sulcatas typically have two large spurs on each thigh (hence the name spurred tortoises). They have strong, sturdy legs, the front ones are very powerful with thick toenails. The legs are also covered in heavy bony scales as a protection from predators and an aid for burrowing.

The carapace is dorsally flattened and quite rounded, it has no nuchal scute and generally undivided supracaudal scute. The gular scutes are paired and in males are quite well developed and forked.

Adult males are very competitive and use their gulars for combat and courtship battles. Anyone who has ever kept sulcatas will know that adult males are easily agitated and can be quite aggressive.

Captive enclosures

Juveniles will require an indoor environment with good access to burrowing and sunbathing. They will need a good source of UVB lighting and adequate space. Sulcatas are very lively tortoises and need a large interesting environment to keep them occupied.

Access to an outdoor pen in full sun with some shade should be provided. Adults require a lot of space and are only suited to outdoor living.

A pen for an average size pair of *Geochelone sulcata* should be at least 10 metres square with access to a fully insulated heated shed no less than 4m x 2m. Any heating equipment within the shed must be firmly in place since sulcatas are remarkably strong. Animals can often get badly injured or even killed by badly fitted heat lamps and radiators.

The outside pen perimeter must be of a strong material preferably heavy duty block work with deep strong footing.

The internal area can be set with a good quality meadow grass and clover mix which the animals will heavily graze on during fine weather. Some sturdy conifers and large upturned logs can be placed around the pen for shade.

During the winter months these animals will reside mainly within their heated shed. The air temperature within the shed must not be allowed to drop below 21C (70F). Hot spot temperatures during the day must be kept above 30C. This can be an expensive business and must be considered before taking on this species as a pet. **Sulcatas do not hibernate.**

Diet

These animals are strictly herbivorous and predominantly feed on grasses and succulents. They never eat meat of any kind! In captivity their diet is easily catered for provided you stick to a high fibre, low protein, low sugar diet.

Assorted meadow grasses should make up the majority of the animals diet, with extra feeding of edible weeds such as dandelions, clover, sow thistles and plantain.

Never feed fruit to sulcatas, sugars in them damage the digestive system and promotes intestinal parasites.

The use of hay during winter months is very beneficial.

Water must be available at all times, and must be kept clean. Although these animals seldom come across water in nature, they all love a good soak on a hot summer's day. Regular drinking will promote good hydration and keeps kidneys in good working order.

Calcium supplements are very important for tortoises which reach massive proportions. Juveniles will benefit from daily access to vetark nutrobal dusted on food. Adults would be best provided with chunks of calcium carbonate (chalk) to chew on.

A diet rich in grasses, weeds and hay will have a good calcium phosphorus ratio, which will help prevent MBD (Metabolic Bone) syndrome.

Be careful not to over feed juveniles, only one-two tablespoons of food per day for animals under one year old. Bulk their diet out with chopped lawn grass/hay.

Reproduction

Sulcatas are relatively simple to breed in captivity. Animals mate throughout the year, often males and females have to be kept separate to protect females from over amorous male aggression.

Females usually lay eggs in early spring often between February and May. Nesting is often a massive undertaking since female sulcatas produce giant size nests, sometimes up to 1 metre deep.

Nests often start as a round large pan about the same size as the female. These pans are usually deeper at the back. This is generally where the nest chamber is dug. Once the eggs are laid the whole site is filled in with soil and sand to completely hide the area.

Females can lay from 10-20 eggs in a nest. 12-14 is more usual. Eggs are large often measuring 40-44mm. Once placed in an incubator at 30C they should start hatching from about 70 days.