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African Spurred Tortoise

Facts:

- Scientific Name: *Geochelone sulcata*
- Native land is on the Southern fringe of Sahara Desert
- May live for 100 + years
- Mature in approximately 25 years/grow 2 inches per year
- Are strictly vegetarian
- Largest mainland tortoise, 3rd largest of all tortoises
- Grow to be 100 – 150 pounds
- Is an endangered or threatened species in the wild
- Is one of the most popular tortoises in captivity due to its very inquisitive nature, responsiveness to its owners, and great personality (it responds to you more like a dog than any other tortoise known).
- No vaccines or allergy problems needed or known. Annual veterinary visits and fecal exams are the typical maintenance requirements.

Diet:

The diet of wild tortoises includes dry grasses, succulent plants, and cacti. Captive tortoises do very well on similar forage, such as pesticide-free and non-fertilized Bermuda grasses, mulberry and grape leaves, green leafy vegetables (collard greens, mustard greens, turnip greens, beet greens, escarole, endive, romaine lettuce), non-spiny cactus pads, and cactus fruit. Store bought greens and thick vegetables are to be fed in small amounts only. No carnivore-based diets are to be fed ever (monkey chow, dog food etc.).

Housing:

As hatchlings, *sulcata* can be kept indoors. Baby pools, large aquariums, or homemade pens are all satisfactory. Alfalfa pellets work well as floor cover for the tortoise. If the pellets are eaten, it is nutritious. It should be kept clean and dry. Adequate hiding places are recommended. Eventually the tortoise will be hardy and large enough to weather the outdoor extremes all the time. This usually occurs at about 2 years of age. Outdoor environments provide more normal behavioral patterns and healthier growth due to the sunlight and availability of grass to graze constantly. A large well-insulated doghouse or above ground burrow should be constructed for both winter and summertime use. Never keep a dog and a tortoise together, as tortoises are a tempting chew toy for dogs.



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Temperature:

Tortoises housed indoors (babies under 2 years) should have a basking spot of approximately 95 degrees Fahrenheit. The rest of the enclosure can be cooler at 75-80 degrees if the cage is large enough to give this temperature gradient. When outdoors, housing the temperature is not controllable. However, if there is an adequate burrow, the tortoise can have a better control of its temperature. Cement block burrows covered with dirt or well-insulated dog houses/storage barns placed under trees or on west walls (to avoid afternoon sun) allow more efficient temperature control. Wintertime provides the opposite challenge to *sulcatus* as these non-hibernating tortoises become chilled in the Phoenix area. Installation of non-light heat producing elements such as infrared heat emitters in the burrow work well to control the *sulcatus*' winter temperature. The emitters should be at least a foot away from the tortoise's shell and should be very secure to its attachment, as these tortoises can easily bulldoze over poorly constructed environments. The burrow should be large and long enough to allow one tortoise past another to go closer to or farther away from the heat source.

Watering:

Desert species of tortoises utilize large urinary bladders in the wild and recycle water, especially in the dry season. To stay hydrated (have adequate water in the body) in the wild, tortoises are active early in the morning and at night in the summer, and at all times (except night) in the fall and spring. They also control where they rest in the heat of the day in the wild. This may be in a cool low spot underneath the roots of a large tree. The lack of ability of captive tortoises to choose the perfect cool habitat causes captive tortoises to become dehydrated, and therefore the need for constant access to water increases. We recommend captive babies have access to water at all times and adults be watered at least twice weeks in a low spot in the yard.

Lighting:

There is no substitute for natural unfiltered sunlight. Outside, tortoises do wonderfully with respect to getting enough sunlight. While inside, tortoises need sunlight at least twice weekly for an hour or two. Shade should be provided in temperature extremes. Baby tortoises should also be provided with artificial indoor lighting. The most efficient light source is the Exo Terra Solar Glo. It is a mercury vapor bulb that emits heat, UVB, and UVA. UV light has multiple benefits, including calcium metabolism and improved appetite and activity. Proper calcium metabolism helps protect against metabolic bone disease. Install the bulb according to the manufacturer's directions. Use a clamp lamp with a ceramic fixture to prevent melting. The fixture should be carefully secured to avoid being bumped into and breaking the filament or



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starting a fire. Make sure to replace the bulb yearly and remember that glass and plastic blocks UV light. If needed, a red bulb can be added for nighttime temperature drops.

The *sulcata* has a domed shell. As they get larger (around 10 inches long), you will need to change how you provide heat to tortoises kept indoors. If heat is provided in the form of an overhead light or an infrared heater, the shell will absorb and hold on to all of the heat emitted. The heat will not reach the rest of the body and will slowly burn the shell from the inside out over several weeks. Eventually, the top layer of the shell will detach and come off. To prevent this from happening, remove the heat-producing bulb, as the tortoise grows larger. Install a non-heat producing broad-spectrum UV bulb. For heat, use an oil re-circulating heater in the room, as it will heat the air in the room instead of your tortoise's shell.

Cleanliness:

Being clean is essential for both the tortoise's health and yours. All cages should be cleaned as frequently as needed. Tortoises often consume their own stool if it is left in the cage. Uneaten food also needs cleaned up after several hours. It is also always important to wash your hands after handling the tortoise or cleaning its cage.

Signs of Sickness:

- Not eating
- Runny nose
- Reddened eyes
- Diarrheas
- Depression