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Desert Tortoise Care Sheet

The Desert Tortoise (*Xerobates agassizii*) is endangered in the wild and protected by both federal and state laws. These tortoises can be adopted if they are captive born. Wild tortoises should remain in the wild (unless severely injured or ill). If an owner is keeping a tortoise without proper permits, he or she may turn their tortoise in to Game and Fish or apply for permits to comply with the law. Permits must be obtained from Game and Fish and proper facilities must be provided. The commitment for owning a tortoise is 60-80 years (leave them to a responsible person in your will), as this is the longevity of a perfectly kept tortoise. Once a tortoise is in captivity, IT SHOULD NOT BE RELEASED due to potentially infectious diseases being spread and carried by captive stressed or exposed tortoises. Unwanted tortoises should be returned to the AZ Game and Fish for re-adoption.

Housing

Outside natural habitat is the best type of housing. Shelter and burrowing areas should be landscaped into the yard. The bigger the yard, the better. The area should be escape proof and fenced off. This requires burying the fence or cement blocks below the ground surface. Toxic plants (Oleander) should be removed from the grazing environment and the environment should be fertilizer and pesticide free. If outside habitat is unavailable, the Desert Tortoise should not be kept as a pet.

Diet

Healthy tortoises should eat every day. Natural diet should be provided when possible (various native plants and flowers). Fresh graze should be the predominant part of the diet (Bermuda grass is excellent). The diet should be supplemented with dark green leafy vegetables as needed (collard, mustard, turnip, and dandelion greens). Grass hay (timothy or orchard) should be provided free choice. Bulky, watery vegetables (zucchini, squash, tomatoes, etc.) should be given only rarely because their waste content may be associated with doming of the scutes on the carapace (upper shell). The tortoises tend to grow slower on non-watery diets but ultimately will be healthier. Calcium supplementation is not needed if the tortoise is on a good diet and is outside.

Breeding

Sexual maturity is more size dependent than age dependent. Wild caught tortoises are generally mature between 10-15 years of age. In captivity, they will generally reach breeding size in 7-9 years because food is more readily attained. Males have concave plastrons (under shell) at maturity, longer tails, faster sloping carapaces (upper shell), larger mental glands



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(under the chin), and longer gular scute (front part of plastron). Males begin pursuing females shortly after coming out of hibernation. The males will fight amongst each other for breeding rights. Usually between May and July, gravid females began excavating a carefully picked egg laying spot where they will lay 2-12 ping pong ball sized eggs. Females can clutch twice in a season.

Hibernation

October/November is usually the time that tortoises become more sluggish, eat less, and bask less. A suitable hibernation place needs to be provided. An insulated doghouse with dry soil on the floor and a tarp entrance works well. The doghouse or natural burrow should be kept in a non-flood zone area. Some keepers prefer to hibernate their tortoises inside (garage, closet, or basement). A deep, newspaper insulated, cardboard box works well. The box should be covered with a blanket and kept off the floor. If keeping the tortoise in the garage DO NOT IDLE YOUR CAR (carbon monoxide poisoning). The incubational temperature should be between 50-60 degrees Fahrenheit.

Hibernating tortoises should be checked weekly and should respond when touched on the feet. Around March or April, tortoises become active in their hibernation areas and should be taken out of hibernation. At this time, soaking them in 1" of lukewarm water will stimulate them to drink. Within a week or two, they should resume normal activity. If not, consult your veterinarian.

A desert tortoise should weigh an adequate amount before hibernating.

$(\text{Shell Length (cm)} \times \text{Width (cm)} \times \text{Height (cm)} \times .66) / 1000 = \text{ideal weight in kg.}$

If the tortoise weighs more than 5% less from its ideal weight, it should not be hibernated. Do not hibernate sick or injured tortoises. These tortoises need to be brought inside, kept at 85 degrees, and nursed back to health (underlying problems should be diagnosed and discussed with your veterinarian). All tortoises should have a pre-hibernation exam and fecal test before going into hibernation. Hatchlings and tortoises under 2 years old should not be hibernated.