



Basic Information on Aquatic Turtles

Painted turtles, map turtles and slider turtles are the varieties most often kept by turtle lovers. The care and requirements of these turtles are similar. These turtles are generally found in ponds and streams throughout the United States.

Painted turtles (*Graptemys picta*) are a smooth-shelled turtle with a shell typically 6 to 8 inches long. They have a life expectancy of 25 years.

Map or sawback turtles (*Graptemys kohni*) have a well-defined keel running down the middle of the carapace (top shell). A number of these species have a well defined keel with large knobs or spines jutting upwards or backwards (hence the name sawback). Their carapace grows 9 to 10 inches.

Red-eared sliders (*Chrysemys scripta elegans*) are the water turtles most often sold in pet stores. They are identified by the orange or red markings on either sides of their head behind their eyes (just where an ear should be). Their shell can grow from 11 to 16 inches in length.

Yellow belly sliders (*Chrysemys scripta scripta*) look just like red ear sliders. However they don't have the "red ear". Their head and legs have many thin yellow stripes. Their top shell (carapace) is green and their undershell (plastron) is yellow.

Choosing a pet

When choosing a pet observe the animal. Does it move with vigor? Does it move quickly in the water and swim around the tank? Pick up the turtle and give it a quick exam. Check for signs of cloudy, closed or swollen eyes. Check its carapace (top shell) and plastron (bottom shell), make sure these are firm and without soft spots. Make sure it's nose and mouth are free of any bubbly discharge.

Housing

Aquatic turtles need a large area for proper exercise. If kept too confined, they may become obese. Turtles should be kept in a tank 3 – 5 times wider than the turtle is long, and twice that width in length. A turtle who is 4 inches across the shell should be housed in a tank that is at least 12 inches wide and 24 inches long (minimum size). When in doubt remember that bigger is always better! A 20 gallon, 30 long, or 55 gallon are the most commonly recommended aquariums for housing turtles.

How deep should the water be?

Rule of thumb: the water depth should equal the width of the turtle's shell. At this depth the turtle can rest on the bottom of the tank (with all four feet touching) and raise its head to breathe on the surface.

Handling The Turtle

Give the turtle a few days to acclimate. It may spend the first few days tightly squeezed into it's shell, coming out only when alone. After a few days it will begin to come out and explore it's surroundings.

Always use two hands to pick up your turtle. Remember to support it's feet. (Turtles feel more secure when they feel something under their feet.) Conversely, they are stressed when allowed to "swim" in air.

Remember: Always wash your hands directly after handling any reptile. Germs can live from reptile to hands to door knobs, phones etc. Although a child may not touch the reptile directly they may touch other common household items.

Diet

Feedings are recommended every other day. Feed as much as the turtle's head and neck could hold. We feed Tetra's ReptoMin or Nutrafin Turtle Pellets. That, along with an occasional treat, (fish, crickets and worms) should constitute a balanced diet. Young turtles need more protein during growth spurts. At this time (warms months) feed more live food.

The most common problem of water turtles is obesity. The best way to detect this is to just look at your turtle. When it pulls it's head into it's shell, do it's legs stick out? When sitting in the basking area are there billows of flesh spilling out around it's neck? If any of this is true, your turtle may be overweight. Ensure that it has a proper size tank for exercise, and cut back on the amount fed.

Heater

Water temperature should be from 72° to 82° F. Sliders prefer water slightly warmer (up into the upper 80's). This can be accomplished with a submersible aquarium heater. You will need a thermometer. Place the heater inside the tank – wait fifteen minutes (allowing the glass to adjust to the water's temperature) before plugging it in. When the water reaches the ideal temperature turn the heater dial back (toward a lower temp) until the light turns off. When the water's temperature begins to drop the heater will switch itself back on. The heater should be placed in an area where it will not be bumped by the turtles but is in the water flow.

(Remember: always wait 15 minutes before plugging in your heater! If it is plugged in too soon the glass will crack.)

Water turtles also require a dry heated basking area. A regular reptile basking light should be hung over this spot raising the air temperature from 85° to 90°F during the day. If your turtle is sluggish, it is probably too cold.

Lighting

All turtles require ultraviolet rays in order to metabolize vitamins. The light should be hung no more than 12 inches above a dry platform with no glass or plastic between the light and the

platform. Ordinary glass and plastic block the ultraviolet light of the bulb. Any full-spectrum fluorescent tube such as Repti-Glo 5.0 or 8.0 by The Hagen Company is suitable for this purpose.

Decorations

Turtles require a basking area. This area needs to be large enough to support all of the turtles in your tank at one time. This may be fashioned from gravel and rock, or drift wood. Plastic aquarium plants (turtles eat live plants), river rock, small statuettes all can be added to your turtle tank. Any decorations which are safe for an aquarium are safe for your turtle tank. Please remember each of these items needs to be washed during a complete "break down" to prevent too much bacterial growth.

Cage Cleaning

Turtles are high maintenance animals. Their tank water should be completely changed least once a week. A water change twice in one week should not be an unusual occurrence. Even with water changes, we still recommend an occasional full break down and cleaning with a mild bleach solution (1 part bleach to 10 parts water). **Remember** all water should be treated with a dechlorinator before returning your pet to its home.

Another product that will help keep your turtle's environment healthy is Turtle Clean® by Hagen. By adding this product to the tank the turtle waste will be broken down more quickly and you won't have to clean as often!

Water quality is very important! Turtles who are kept in contaminated water become stressed, and may become ill with bacterial infections.

Tip: some owners feed their turtles in shallow holding tanks (5 or 10 gallon tanks) and wait until after defecation before returning them to their home.

Filtration

Some tanks have a slot cut into the side to accommodate small power filters. Otherwise, we recommend an internal filter such as Fluval by Hagen. The filter pads in these filters should be rinsed in tap water two to three times a week (or as much as you like). Sponge filters and undergravel filters are not recommended for turtle tanks. Having a good filter will allow you to cut back on the number of weekly water changes.

Cage placement

Turtles are not normally very social animals, however over time they will really pay attention to their owners. We recommend placing the cage in a room that is quiet and without loud noises. This will help your pet feel more secure.

Never use aerosol products around any animal. This includes perfumes, hairsprays, room deodorizers, spray paint, strong cleaners, etc.

Veterinary Care

Become familiar with the vets in your area that treat reptiles and other exotic pets. You may wish to schedule a check up for your newly acquired pet. Speak to your vet and ask their recommendations. Always have their number ready in case of an emergency.

Please Note: The information in this handout is meant to provide basic information only. There are several good books available on the care and maintenance of aquatic turtles.

B&B Pet Stop, Inc. 2003

Turtles and the Law

21 Code of Federal Regulations S1240.62 (1986). [Code of Federal Regulations] [Title 21, Volume 8] [Revised as of April 1, 2002]
From the U.S. Government Printing Office via GPO Access [CITE: 21CFR1240] [Page 660-666]

TITLE 21—FOOD AND DRUGS
CHAPTER 1—FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION, DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES (CONTINUED)
PART 1240—CONTROL OF COMMUNICABLE DISEASES
Subpart D—Specific Administrative Decisions Regarding Interstate Shipments
Sec. 1240.62 Turtles intrastate and interstate requirements.

(a) Definition. As used in this section the term "turtles" includes all animals commonly known as turtles, tortoises, terrapins, and all other animals of the order Testudinata, class Reptilia, except marine species (families Dermachelidae and Chelonidae). (b) Sales; general prohibition. Except as otherwise provided in this section, viable turtle eggs and live turtles with a carapace length of less than 4 inches shall not be sold, held for sale, or offered for any other type of commercial or public distribution. (c) Destruction of turtles or turtle eggs; criminal penalties. (1) Any viable turtle eggs or live turtles with a carapace length of less than 4 inches which are held for sale or offered for any other type of commercial or public distribution shall be subject to destruction in a humane manner by or under the supervision of an officer or employee of the Food and Drug Administration in accordance with the following procedures: (i) Any District Office of the Food and Drug Administration, upon detecting viable turtle eggs or live turtles with a carapace length of less than 4 inches which are held for sale or offered for any other type of commercial or public distribution, shall serve upon the person in whose possession such turtles or turtle eggs are found a written demand that such turtles or turtle eggs be destroyed in a humane manner under the supervision of said District Office, within 10 working days from the date of promulgation of the demand. The demand shall recite with particularity the facts which justify the demand. After service of the demand, the person in possession of the turtles or turtle eggs shall not sell, distribute, or otherwise dispose of any of the turtles or turtle eggs except to destroy them under the supervision of the District Office, unless and until the Director of the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition withdraws the demand for destruction after an appeal pursuant to paragraph (c)(1)(ii) of this section. (ii) The person on whom the demand for destruction is served may either comply with the demand or, within 10 working days from the date of its promulgation, appeal the demand for destruction to the Director of the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Food and Drug Administration, 5100 Paint Branch Pkwy., College Park, MD 20740. The demand for destruction may also be appealed within the same period of 10 working days by any other person having a pecuniary interest in such turtles or turtle eggs. In the event of such an appeal, the Center Director shall provide an opportunity for hearing by written notice to the appellant(s) specifying a time and place for the hearing, to be held within 14 days from the date of the notice but not within less than 7 days unless by agreement with the appellant(s). (iii) Appearance by any appellant at the hearing may be by mail or in person, with or without counsel. The hearing shall be conducted by the Center Director or his designee, and a written summary of the proceedings shall be prepared by the person presiding. Any appellant shall have the right to hear and to question the evidence on which the demand for destruction is based, including the right to cross-examine witnesses, and he may present oral or written evidence in response to the demand. (iv) If, based on the evidence presented at the hearing, the Center Director finds that the turtles or turtle eggs were held for sale or offered for any other type of commercial or public distribution in violation of this section, he shall affirm the demand that they be destroyed under the supervision of an officer or employee of the Food and Drug Administration; otherwise, the Center Director shall issue a written notice that the prior demand by the District Office is withdrawn. If the Center Director affirms the demand for destruction he shall order that the destruction be accomplished in a humane manner within 10 working days from the date of the promulgation of his decision. The Center Director's decision shall be accompanied by a statement of the reasons for the decision. The decision of the Center Director shall constitute final agency action, reviewable in the courts. (v) If there is no appeal to the Director of the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition from the demand by the Food and Drug Administration District Office and the person in possession of the turtles or turtle eggs fails to destroy them within 10 working days, or if the demand is affirmed by the Director of the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition after an appeal and the person in possession of the turtles or turtle eggs fails to destroy them within 10 working days, the District Office shall designate an officer or employee to destroy the turtles or turtle eggs. It shall be unlawful to prevent or to attempt to prevent such destruction of turtles or turtle eggs by the officer or employee designated by the District Office. Such destruction will be stayed if so ordered by a court pursuant to an action for review in the courts as provided in paragraph (c)(1)(iv) of this section. (2) Any person who violates any provision of this section, including but not limited to any person who sells, offers for sale, or offers for any other type of commercial or public distribution viable turtle eggs or live turtles with a carapace length of less than 4 inches, or who refuses to comply with a valid final demand for destruction of turtles or turtle eggs (either an unappealed demand by an FDA District Office or a demand which has been affirmed by the Director of the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition pursuant to appeal), or who fails to comply with the requirement in such a demand that the manner of destruction be humane, shall be subject to a fine of not more than \$1,000 or imprisonment for not more than 1 year, or both, for each violation, in accordance with section 368 of the Public Health Service Act (42 U.S.C. 271). (d) Exceptions. The provisions of this section are not applicable to: (1) The sale, holding for sale, and distribution of live turtles and viable turtle eggs for bona fide scientific, educational, or exhibitional purposes, other than use as pets. (2) The sale, holding for sale, and distribution of live turtles and viable turtle eggs not in connection with a business. (3) The sale, holding for sale, and distribution of live turtles and viable turtle eggs intended for export only, provided that the outside of the shipping package is conspicuously labeled "For Export Only." (4) Marine turtles excluded from this regulation under the provisions of paragraph (a) of this section and eggs of such turtles. (e) Petitions. The Commissioner of Food and Drugs, either on his own initiative or on behalf of any interested person who has submitted a petition, may publish a proposal to amend this regulation. Any such petition shall include an adequate factual basis to support the petition, and will be published for comment if it contains reasonable grounds for the proposed regulation. A petition requesting such a regulation, which would amend this regulation, shall be submitted to the

Dockets Management Branch, Food and Drug Administration, rm. 1-23, 12420
Parklawn Dr., Rockville, MD 20857.