



African Spurred Tortoise

Natural History

Common Name: African Spurred Tortoise, Sahel Tortoise, “sulcata” (informal term)

Scientific Name: *Centrochelys sulcata*

Lifespan

- Possibly 70+ years in the wild, captive record 54 years

Size

- 24 – 33” in carapace length, 70 – 100 lbs with males being slightly larger than females. Record size was a male 41” and 232 lbs.
- Third-largest tortoise species in the world (only Galapagos and Aldabra are larger) and largest mainland tortoise species in the world

Distribution

- Relatively narrow strip of northern and central Africa (generally the Sahel region and along the southern border of the Sahara Desert)

Habitat

- Desert, semi-arid grassland, savanna, steppes, and thorn shrubland. Long dry season and very short wet season, temps constantly hot, ranging from 59 to 108 F.

Habits

- Grazes constantly, often walks long distances to graze
- Powerful burrower – constructs deep and lengthy burrows (commonly three feet underground and more than 10 feet long - sometimes 20 feet deep and over 30 feet long) to escape extreme heat and preserve water loss (moisture is higher in the burrows)
- Solitary – male will combat one another and may aggressively attempt to breed with females. Females may also show aggression toward other tortoises

Diet

- Strictly herbivorous. A variety of grasses and plants with a lot of roughage (high fiber, low protein), flowers, cactus, and will consume soil to obtain calcium
- Lush grasses such as Indian sandbur, wiregrasses, and *Schoenefeldia*, are available at times of the year, but die during the long dry season





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Captive Care

Housing

- Grows rapidly first 5 – 10 years, can possibly double in size each year for the first three years
- 10 to 20 gallon long aquarium for hatchlings or young juveniles, but will quickly outgrow
- Adults must be kept in large pens either inside or preferably outside during summer months
- Substrate should be grasses or grass based hay such as timothy, Burmuda, orchard hays, alfalfa, etc., orchid bark, peat moss, and a couple pieces of slate or rocks to keep nails filed
- Outdoor pens must be reinforced to prevent burrowing under and a heated dog house when the temp drops
- Access to a very shallow water bowl in the cage or pen, even if it appears not to be used
- Humid hide with moist sphagnum or damp paper towels for hatchlings or juveniles

Temperature and Lighting

- Ambient cage temperatures in 80's F, with "hot area" of 90 to 120 F. Provide heat gradient
- "Hot area" can be achieved by using radiant heat, heat pad on outside of cage, or both
- Lighting can be dome lamp with incandescent bulbs for heat as well - 12 hr cycle
- UVB lighting necessary, must be unfiltered, bulb within 6 -12" of tortoise, bulb changed every 4 – 6 months even if light still works
- Thermometer (temp gun or probe) to measure actual temperature is a necessity
- Adjustable temperature heat pads, thermostat and/or rheostat for any heat source is beneficial
- Outside cage/pen dog house can be heated with heat mat, bulbs, or heat emitter
- Bring tortoise inside during cold temps and/or very wet weather

Diet

- Completely herbivorous diet in captivity
- Base diet should be pesticide and herbicide free grasses, grass clippings, hays with plenty of roughage, allowed to graze
- Diet supplemented with dark leafy greens romaine, collared, mustard, dandelion, escarole, endive, alfalfa, squash, bell peppers, prickly pear cactus, pumpkin, flowers, pelleted diets*
- Avoid vegetables high in oxalates (spinach, broccoli, carrots, etc.)
- Fruits can be offered in small quantities only
- Supplemental vitamins/minerals necessary (calcium/phosphorus ratio), especially for juveniles

Special Notes

- Most issues from being kept too cool and/or too moist, respiratory infections
- Metabolic Bone Disease, shell pyramiding (too much protein), kidney issues, uric acid in the bladder, consuming bright colored inedible objects, good at digging and escaping
- Best kept singly, especially males, but watch for aggression in females too

