

How do I look after my turtle?



Introduction

The Eastern Long-Necked Turtle (*Chelodina Longicollis*) is the only species of turtle allowed to be kept in the ACT without a license. The keeping of turtles requires a specific set-up. Turtles can live for up to 100 years in the wild.

Housing

Young turtles spend most of their time in the water. A glass aquarium or specific turtle tank is recommended to house young turtles. If using an aquarium, you will need a platform for the turtle(s) to be able to get out of the water. You can purchase a "Turtle Dock" from pet shops and suppliers or use clean river rocks. It is essential that any rocks used are thoroughly cleaned

and washed in boiling water to remove any harmful toxins. Only boiling water can be used to clean rocks, with absolutely no detergents or cleaning agents.

The size of your tank is important. For a baby turtle, a minimum tank size of 2 feet is recommended, although the bigger the better. The tank needs to be well ventilated by leaving the lid off. You may want to use a mesh top to prevent other pets and children from accessing the tank.

It is essential to maintain high water quality, assisted by a good quality aquarium filter (or two, depending on the size of the tank). Ensure your tank is cleaned regularly to assist in maintaining water quality. You should use a "turtle health condition block" (available from pet shops and suppliers) when making complete water changes.

Lighting

Turtles need access to quality light during the day. You can use a fluorescent light reflector that is designed for aquariums. You must use a fluorescent tube that is specifically designed for reptiles. This tube emits high levels of UVA and UVB wavelengths which help to prevent Metabolic Bone Disease, keep the shell strong and healthy and increase appetite. You can also place a basking lamp above the platform where the turtle gets out of the water. An incandescent bulb specifically designed for reptiles should be used. It should be approximately 30cm above the platform. This will help increase the air temperature above the water and stimulate natural basking behaviours. This type of light should be used in combination with the essential fluorescent light. You can use electrical timers (available from supermarkets for under \$10.00 each) to turn lights on and off, set to replicate the outside light cycle (10 to 12 hours of light in summer and as low as 6 hours in winter).

Only reptile fluorescent lights contain the correct UV wavelength and lights designed for aquarium plants should not be used. Glass filters out the UV radiation so it is essential that lids are not placed under the light. Light tubes must be replaced every 12 months, even if they still emit light, as the UV properties diminish in this time. The importance of quality light for turtles cannot be underestimated.

Temperature

The temperature of the water should be between 24 and 28 degrees Celsius, with an average temperature of 26 degrees Celsius. A submersible aquarium heater is recommended, with only one suction cap holding it on the side of the tank. This helps prevent young turtles getting stuck between the heater and the glass, between the two suction caps. The use of an aquarium thermometer is recommended. If the temperature is too low, turtles will stop eating. If it is too high, the turtles will probably die. The temperature should *never* reach higher than 28 degrees Celsius. It is also recommended to check the temperature of the air above the water level, directly under the basking lamp to ensure it does not get too hot and burn the turtles.

Feeding

Turtles of all ages must be fed in the water as they cannot swallow easily on land. It is recommended to feed baby turtles once per day during their first year of life. After the age of 1 year, turtles should be fed 3 to 4 times a week in summer and 1 to 2 times a week during winter. By using a feeding container (an ice-cream tub for very small turtles and a larger plastic container for older turtles) and not feeding your turtles in the tank, you can assist in maintaining high water quality. Fill the container with a few centimetres of water from the tank to ensure the temperature is correct. Also fill your tank with the same amount of tap water to prevent low water levels and assist in a continuous water change.

Frozen turtle dinners can be fed to turtles of all ages. *These are **not** nutritionally balanced diets and must only form part of the diet.* You can also feed turtles commercial pellets, bloodworms, blackworms, small water bugs, earthworms, crickets, small fish and speckled feeder roaches. You can purchase speckled feeder roaches of all sizes from www.herpshop.com.au. They will be delivered to your door and are a great type of live food for your turtle. More information on these roaches can be found on the website. It is essential to feed live foods as these are the most nutritionally balanced foods available.

Ensure the food you feed your turtle is appropriately sized. Cut the food into bite sized pieces, no bigger than your turtle's head. Over-feeding can result in obese turtles and under-feeding can result in thin, unhealthy turtles. Keep an eye on your turtle's eating habits and remember that *variety is the key*.

For further information regarding your turtle, refer to "Keeping Long-Necked Turtles" by Darren Green or other turtle care books.