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Aldabra Giant Tortoise (*Geochelone/Aldabrachelys gigantea*)

Island Giants

The Aldabra giant tortoise is a large, terrestrial species of tortoise indigenous to the Aldabra Atoll located in the Seychelles, which contains perhaps the largest population of this species, as well as surrounding islands and National Parks containing smaller, more isolated populations. Aldabra tortoises are believed to be the second largest species of tortoise following the Galapagos Giant Tortoise (*Geochelone/Chelonoidis nigra*), and can be identified by their small neck plate that is absent in other giant tortoise species. Aldabras are typically dark gray to blackish in color with thick, highly domed carapaces and long necks used for reaching and gathering food. Their heads are relatively small, pointed, and covered in larger scales. Aldabras are the largest animals occurring naturally on the Aldabra Island atoll, and are believed to fill similar ecological roles and niches as elephants of Africa and Asia in that they are the main consumers of vegetation, and will often noticeably alter their habitats in search of food by knocking over small trees, shrubs, and other vegetation. Aldabras are also among the more social and gregarious tortoise species, often being found both individually and in herds, where they may wallow in mud holes or shallow wetlands, and graze and browse in groups as well. All tortoises are mainly terrestrial (land dwelling) and are characterized by highly domed shells and large, elephantine like feet. The Aldabra tortoise is available in the pet trade through specialty reptile shows, specialty stores, or online, but due to their obviously large adult sizes, are only suitable for the most advanced and dedicated reptile enthusiasts willing and able to house them for extremely long periods of time. Large tortoise species are among the longest living animals on Earth, and keeping these them presents some challenges in many areas of the world in which the year round climate does not permit them to be housed outdoors throughout the year. As a result, these tortoises require substantial amounts of housing, space, and resources if they are to be kept properly. These tortoises, IF given the proper care, can make for very personable and rewarding pets to maintain, but can live for at least 100 to 175 years or more and require long term care and commitment. **Please consider the long term responsibilities and housing requirements for these tortoises prior to obtaining one.**

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Testudines

Suborder: Cryptodira

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Superfamily: Testudinoidea

Family: Testudinidae

Genus: Geochelone or Aldabrachelys

Species: *Geochelone/Aldabrachelys gigantea**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

Aldabara tortoises, IF given the proper care, can make for very personable and rewarding pets to maintain, but can live for at least 100 to 175 years or more and require long term care and commitment.

Distribution and Habitat

The largest population of Aldabra giant tortoises occurs on the Aldabra Island Atoll in the Seychellas northeast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. Smaller, and sometimes introduced populations of this tortoise species also exist on the Mauritius and Reunion Islands as well. Within this range, these tortoises may occupy coastal dunes, mangrove swamps, scrublands, or grasslands.

Conservation Status

IUCN Red List Vulnerable (VU).

Experience Level Required

Advanced.

Size

Hatchling Aldabras are typically 2 to 3 ½ inches in size, but have the potential to become very large. Growth rate depends on their environment and level of care. Aldabras are a sexually dimorphic species, with males reaching upwards of 550 lbs. and a carapace length of up to 48 inches, or 4 feet, while females are typically smaller at weights of up to 350 lbs. and carapace sizes of up to 36 inches.

Housing and Enclosure Plus Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

The Aldabra tortoise is oftentimes a coveted choice among reptile keepers, but thorough consideration must be given to their housing requirements before acquiring one. This is a species that will eventually and ideally require outdoor and/or customized enclosures and/or housing for all or parts of the year. In order to be properly accommodated, they are perhaps best maintained in outdoor enclosures depending on what one's state or area's climate/outdoor temperatures can allow or provide. Below are some basic setup guidelines for housing Aldabras both indoors and outdoors to the extent possible. We recommend that additional information and resources beyond only this care sheet be researched when considering an Aldabra or other large tortoise species, and the information below are by no means complete or thoroughly detailed accounts for maintaining these tortoises.

If Housed Outdoors: Outdoor housing for all, or parts of the year depending on what your area's climate will permit is perhaps the most ideal scenario for keeping and maintaining Aldabras. Once sub adults to adults, a custom designed backyard enclosure of appropriate size and specifications can be designed depending on the age and size of the tortoise(s). An outdoor paddock of at least 100 feet by 30 feet is recommended. A perimeter fence should be at least 24 inches in height. Perimeter fencing can be as simple or as eloquent as one may like, but must be opaque, or non-transparent, and extremely sturdy & secure, and can include wooden walls, concrete, or masonry blocks or slabs. Additional substrate beyond the natural substrate already

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provided is typically not required, but should not have been treated or exposed to any chemicals or pesticides. Aldabras are also extremely powerful burrowers, and must be provided an adequately size custom hide box to provide burrowing opportunities, as well as to seek refuge in. To prevent, or at least discourage possible escape through digging elsewhere in the enclosure, one can ensure that perimeter fencing extends at least 18 to 24 inches below the ground level, by providing an aforementioned shelter/hide, or filling in other burrows with solid material. Temperature wise, Aldabras that are housed outdoors are exposed to a wider range of temperatures, and must be provided with shaded, as well as heated refuges/hides when temperatures drop too drastically. Areas that maintain nighttime temperatures of a minimum of 55 to 60 degrees F should be considered. Outdoor use heating pads, or pig blankets, can also be used to provide supplemental heating whenever required. In climates where nighttime temperatures begin to consistently fall below these ranges, moving the tortoise(s) into indoor accommodations may also become necessary. Lastly, a large, shallow pool or wallowing area that the tortoises can readily enter and exit should be constructed and provided in an outdoor Aldabra enclosure, and be cleaned or monitored daily.

If Housed Indoors: Hatchling and juvenile Aldabras up to around 2 to 3 years old can be maintained indoors throughout the year for at least the first few years of their lives. One, or groups of hatchlings/juveniles can be maintained in appropriately sized, sturdy, escape proof enclosures including many of the traditional commercially available enclosure brands, or appropriately sized plastic totes, containers, or “tortoise tables”. A tortoise table is a custom built open top form of indoor housing for turtles and tortoises that can have many different sizes, scopes, and specifications depending on the age and size of the turtle/tortoise, space available, or other factors. Because there is so much design variability in constructing a tortoise table, additional information and resources beyond the scope of this care sheet can also be provided, if desired, for maintain an Aldabra tortoise. As adults, this is a species that, alternatively, requires customized enclosure or housing in order to be maintained indoors, which can include all or part of a heated spare room, basement, garage, or other structure or outbuilding. Acceptable substrates for indoor housing must be non-toxic and can include cypress mulch, many various types of straws or hays, or sphagnum moss to maintain some humidity and burrowing opportunities in a required indoor hide.

Providing the proper and correct overhead UVA and UVB lighting and heating is also critical for maintaining the health and adequate growth of these tortoises in an indoor environment. Calcium is an important requirement for these, as well as other tortoise species in order to be maintained at acceptable health. Without the proper lighting and temperatures, Aldabras can be susceptible to MBD (Metabolic Bone Disease) and other shell and growth deficiencies or abnormalities. Ambient room temperature should be maintained at around 80 to 95 degrees F and also be provided with a basking area of within a 100 degree F range on a 12 to 14 hour day/night cycle. For indoor hydration, a shallow water bowl can be provided, but is often more prone to frequent soiling and cleaning. Alternatively, soaking in warm water for 15 to 20 minutes 2 to 3 times weekly, or more frequently for hatchlings, is also beneficial for these tortoises. Spot clean any enclosure for urates, feces, or uneaten food at least twice per week. Be sure to periodically replace the substrate, clean, and disinfect the enclosure and its furnishings at minimum every 2 to 3 months as well. More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one’s needs, as well as those of one’s animals can be given as well.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Herbivorous; In the wild, Aldabras are primarily herbivorous grazers. They will feed on a variety of grasses, leaves, woody plant stems and materials, and occasionally other components such as carrion, invertebrates, and other fruit and vegetable matter.

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When maintained in captivity, providing the proper diet and nutrients is essential for ensuring and maintaining adequate health of these tortoises. **An improper diet can lead to many possible ailments that these tortoise are very susceptible to including bone and shell growth deficiencies and abnormalities, gout, renal failure, and other diseases or disorders seen in captive tortoises. Calcium and vitamin D** are both important nutrients to be provided in their diet. Foods that should be provided should be pesticide and herbicide free, and the bulk of their diets can include various freshly cut hays or grasses such as Bermuda grasses and Lawn fescues. Other acceptable foods to provide include spineless prickly pear pads, clovers, and other amounts of greens, including collard, romaine lettuce, mustard, and turnip greens. Carrots, sweet potatoes, and other fruits and vegetables can also be provided as additional browsing material. Hibiscus, dandelions, roses, and some other very small amounts of fruit or vegetable can also be provided as treats on a sparingly basis. Aldabras should never be provided excess animal based proteins, such as feeder insects, fish, or pre killed rodents, and other foods high in proteins, sugars, and/or fats should be provided on an extremely sparingly basis, or not at all. Do not provide iceberg lettuce as well, as this is very nutritionally poor for these tortoises. Tortoises that are housed or allowed access outdoors can also be allowed to graze on grasses and weeds as well provided they have not been chemically treated with fertilizers or other pesticides. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Handling

Most small to mid-sized turtle and tortoise species that are not aggressive or prone to biting can be picked up and handled either by placing both hands along both sides of the shell, or from the rear of the carapace with the thumb on the carapace and index through pinky fingers on the plastron to reduce the chances of being kicked, scratched, or nipped when they are threatened. Although most species of chelonians are not outwardly aggressive, defensive, or dangerous, they can become stressed as a result of over-handling, however, and some species, and even individual animals can be shyer than others. These are some considerations to keep in mind when handling any chelonian species. Very large species of tortoises, such as Aldabaras, that become much too large, heavy, and impractical to pick up or handle by hand can be trained to move voluntarily and more quickly using operant conditioning and a variety of other voluntary methods utilized in zoological professions. Large tortoise species can be very intelligent animals that can respond well to food and other stimuli, and further information on these tactics and techniques beyond the scope of this initial care and information sheet can be provided upon request to anyone willing and able to accept the responsibility of keeping and housing these extremely large and long lived animals in captivity.

****Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens****

Contact

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this animal, group of animals, or this care sheet, please email and contact the Madison Area Herpetological Society at info@madisonherps.org

Disclaimer: Note that the information provided in these, or any care sheets, are not intended to be all-exhaustive, and further research and care should always be sought and provided when it comes to any species one may prospectively be interested in. These care sheets are also not intended to serve as substitutes for professional veterinary medical care and husbandry should any animal require it. Always seek proper and professional veterinary care for any animal should the need arise, and be prepared ahead of time for any and all husbandry costs and expenses that may occur with any animal beyond the initial purchase. Any animal owned is ultimately a matter of personal/individual care and

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responsibility.

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