

## Turtle Care

The two species commonly sold in Victoria are the Long Neck Turtle and the Murray Short Neck Turtle. They are usually obtained from licensed dealers and must not be taken from the wild. A minimum size of 10cm shell length applies in Victoria, they can be kept inside or outside and spend most of their time in water.

### The Inside Turtle

An aquarium at least 90cm long can hold one or two turtles. A bigger aquarium is required for three or more turtles. The water must be heated to 24 – 28c, using an aquarium heater.

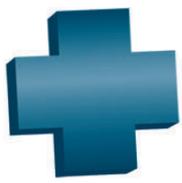
Fluorescent tube lighting that supplies Ultraviolet light is necessary for normal bone and shell growth. You must use the right type of light and it cannot be allowed to pass through glass or plastic. Suitable fluorescent tubes are obtained from reptile dealing shops. To reduce evaporation and prevent turtles from breathing cold air, it is important to use cover glass or a hood on top of the aquarium. There cannot be any glass or plastic beneath the fluorescent light. Put a new tube in every 12 months, because they lose the UV light over time.

Water depth should be at least as deep as the length of the shell. A dry area that the turtle can climb onto is required. A stable platform with splayed legs and a roughened ramp can allow the turtles to swim beneath the platform and between the legs. Red gum and stainless steel screws make good durable platforms. "Turtle Docks" available through the pet trade also work well. A pile of rocks can slip and trap a turtle, take up lots of room and accumulate debris in areas that are difficult to clean.

Some form of filtration will be needed. Water changes and filter cleaning every two to four weeks, changing 20% to 40 % of the water, using a Gravel Cleaning Syphon will keep the environment healthy. Shallow gravel is easy to keep clean and less work. A handful or two of aquarium shell grit, crushed coral or calcium blocks (available from aquarium shops) will supply some calcium for the turtle's shell and help to control the pH of the water.

### The Outside Turtle

Enclosures with a pond must receive plenty of sunshine. Shady retreats are needed both on land and in water. Plants or constructed shelters can supply shade. The best ponds are made of concrete and waterproofed with "Boncrete". The surface should be smoothed to avoid abrasion and after 2 days of drying any rough areas can be scraped away. Part of the pond should have



gently sloping side to allow turtles to climb in and out. A new concrete pond must be rinsed and scrubbed and filled and drained until the alkalinity is reduced and the pH of the water is neutral. This usually takes about two weeks. A pond 2m x 2m x 1/2m deep will accommodate upto four turtles. Quick cheap ponds can be constructed from plastic sand pits or wading pools. These are set into the ground but must also provide the turtle with a way of climbing in and out. A ramp of red gum works well.

Turtles must be enclosed to prevent wondering and loss. The sides of the enclosure can be sheet metal or fibre cement. The walls are sunken 30-50cm below the surface and at least 50cm high. If lizards like blue tongues are to be kept in the same enclosure, the sides should be 1 metre high. Beware of dogs attacking reptiles. If the backyard is not dog proof, the only sure protection is a wire top.

## Feeding

Turtles can only feed and swallow when in water. They will come out of the water to take the food. The diet should be based on small whole fish. They will also eat worms, snails, insects and some plant material. Small whole fish like pilchards and white bait can be chopped into pieces. Variety is best and uneaten food should be removed to prevent fouling.

Small live fish add interest for both turtles and people and can be a valuable dietary supplement. Turtles are not very nimble and fish usually avoid them. Fish also help to clean up food scraps. Feeding a turtle two or three times weekly is usually adequate.

## Hibernation

Turtles kept outside will "Hibernate" from about April/May to about September/October. During this period, they are normally inactive and do not feed. Some will hibernate at the bottom of the pond, which is quite normal. Others will bury themselves in soil or leaf litter. If leaf litter is decaying or composting, this is bad for the turtle. Shelters packed with dry eucalyptus litter will work well. Turtles kept outside should not be fed from the beginning of April to the end of September. If they go into hibernation with food in their stomach, the food will rot and possibly kill the turtle. Even during the warmer months it is wise to feed turtles during fine, warm weather.

Turtles kept inside must be heated and not allowed to hibernate. Turtles make hardy and long lived pets. Hopefully you will not have problems but if you do, it is important to seek help and advice as quickly as possible.

## Enjoy your Turtle!

**Turtles make great pets and we hope you enjoy yours!**