

# Tortoise Care



photo: Charlesjsharp

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**Prior to working for the Vegan Society, I ran a small animal rescue with family and friends. At present we have three beautiful rescued tortoises in our care, Amos, Miller and Kobe. Kobe (which is Swahili for tortoise), is a seven year old leopard and was the first tortoise we ever rescued.**

**L**ike millions of tortoises before him, Kobe is a victim of the exotic pet trade. Kobe was taken from the wild in his native home of Africa and smuggled from the country. He was then sold to meet demand on the UK market and purchased by someone who had no knowledge of how to care for him.

In his new 'home', Kobe was kept in a tiny glass fish tank, and it was in here that he spent the first five years of his life. Kobe's owners provided misinformed 'care' that caused deformed growth of his shell (known as pyramiding) and the onset of metabolic bone disease (MBD). Kobe also suffered muscle wastage from years without exercise and he was left barely able to walk.

When he became too large, Kobe was taken to a pet shop and put up for sale. Here he fared no better and was kept within a small, overheated vivarium (a wooden reptile enclosure with glass doors), without access to water. During this time, Kobe's beak became so overgrown that he was no longer able to eat and he was left to starve to death.

With the right diet and correct environmental conditions, Kobe is able to walk again and both his MBD and deformity have been prevented from developing further. No longer trapped

inside of a tank, Kobe is free to explore, dig, bathe and graze. While we can never give Kobe back the freedom that has been taken from him, we are committed to ensuring that he has the best life we can possibly give him.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO TORTOISE CARE

### Housing

Tanks and vivariums of any kind are unsuitable housing for tortoises. They are dangerously under ventilated, causing high internal temperatures to build and inflicting heat stress, heat stroke, dehydration and even death upon their inhabitants.

Instead, open topped enclosures called tortoise tables (see the Tortoise Trusts guide on how to build your own <http://www.tortoisetrust.org/articles/Tortoisetable.htm>) should be used. Ideal for the health and comfort of tortoises, tables are well ventilated and allow an essential heat gradient to form. However, tortoises are happiest and healthiest when outside. All tortoises should have access to a secure outdoor enclosure containing wild grasses and tortoise friendly plants; an arid area for basking; a weatherproof hide; and a cloche. For information on correct housing for tortoises visit

<http://www.tortoisetrust.org/articles/vivarium.htm> and <http://www.tortoisetrust.org/articles/habitatdesign.htm>

### Predators

It is essential to protect tortoises from potential predators, including cats, dogs, rats, foxes and birds. Dog attacks are common and typically involve dogs who have previously spent months or even years cohabiting peacefully with a tortoise. Dogs should never be allowed direct contact with a tortoise, even under supervision.

### Substrate

Tortoises should be provided with a deep substrate of 50% play sand and 50% top soil. This is the only substrate that replicates their natural environment and facilitates important behaviours such as digging and thermoregulation. Other substrates, including woodchips, calci-sand, hemp, woodshavings and alfalfa pellets are dangerously unsuitable and often fatal, please see <http://www.tortoisetrust.org/articles/substrates.html>

### Light and Heat

Tortoises depend upon their environment to provide the correct balance of ultraviolet

light (UVA and UVB), visual light and heat. These are essential for sustaining metabolism of food, general activity and overall health and must be provided either through the use of a mercury self-ballasted lamp or a UV fluorescent strip bulb used in conjunction with an incandescent heat lamp. 10-12 hours of UV exposure is required every day. Mercury self-ballasted lamps provide higher quality UV light and have a significantly longer life than UV strip bulbs, which must be replaced every six months. Lamps should be positioned to create a bright basking spot measuring 32-36C at the top of the tortoise's shell. A cool area of 19-23C must also be provided, allowing tortoise to thermoregulate by migrating between temperatures.

Underside heat sources, including heat mats, should not be used as they inhibit thermoregulation, cause fermentation of food within the gut and inflict direct thermal burns.

### Food

It is a common misconception that tortoises should eat salad and fruit. In reality, these foods are highly

unsuitable and a diet based on them can cause significant health problems. Pelleted tortoise foods should also be avoided, as their high protein, sugar and fat content is linked to poor bone density, deformity, kidney stones and fatal renal failure. To meet calcium and vitamin D requirements, a dietary supplement, such as Nutrobal, should be provided at least twice a week and limestone flour should be provided freely. Tortoise diets are complex and different species have different needs, so for detailed information on healthy diets, please visit <http://www.tortoisetrust.org/articles/articles.html#husbandry> and for a comprehensive food database visit <http://www.thetortoisetable.org.uk>

### Water

Like all animals, tortoises need unrestricted access to fresh drinking water. Regular baths are also essential, ensuring good hydration, stimulating urination and helping to prevent the development of kidney or bladder stones. Three 10-20 minutes baths a week, in lukewarm water, no deeper than the line where the bottom of the shell (plastron) joins the top

(carapace), are sufficient. Tortoises should never be left unsupervised while bathing.

### Hibernation

Only certain species of tortoise hibernate and African species, including leopard tortoises like Kobe, remain awake all year round. Hibernation is a complex subject and hibernating species require careful maintenance within specific parameters. *Safer Hibernation and Your Tortoise*, by Andy Highfield, is essential reading for anyone caring for a hibernating species of tortoise <http://www.tortoisetrust.org/articles/safer.html>

If you have a tortoise in your care it is very important that their species is correctly identified by a specialist exotics vet or a reputable organisation such as the Tortoise Trust. This will enable you to create an environment that meets both their physiological and behavioural needs and to provide a diet that accurately meets their requirements.

For more information on caring for tortoises, please visit the Tortoise Trust <http://www.tortoisetrust.org/>



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