

Before Adopting a Turtle or Tortoise

By Susan Tellem

Keeping tortoises (and turtles) as pets is growing by leaps and bounds in the U.S. and elsewhere. At the same time, the number of turtles and tortoises in the wild is decreasing significantly. So what's a turtle lover to do if he or she wants to add one to the household menagerie? First, learn everything you can about the particular type of tortoise or turtle you are thinking about getting. Second, adopt – don't buy. There are a number of good rescue groups all around the country.



Meant to Be Wild

Turtles suffer injuries and stress from violent capture from the wild, usually done with barbaric hooks or traps. During transportation from the forest to pet stores, turtles and tortoises are piled on top of each other in cramped, cold, soggy burlap bags. They are offered for sale at pet stores, markets and reptile shows and on street corners. Many live the rest of their lives in small tanks, a miserable existence for such a wild creature.

Habitat destruction, live markets where turtles are sold for food, and international trade in exotic animals have led to a stunning decline in these gentle creatures. Now, they are threatened or endangered all over the world. Although these animals have been on the earth for more than 200 million years, it is estimated that their numbers have declined drastically in just the past 50 years. Scientists claim that we will be lucky to have 50 more years before turtles and tortoises are extinct.

Special Care Required

Turtles and tortoises are wild animals that pose particular challenges and are more likely to become ill or even die after being purchased as pets. These reptiles can carry salmonella, which is potentially fatal to kids, seniors and adults with compromised immune systems.

If having a turtle or tortoise interests you, read up on their special care. The Internet is full of good information, especially sites that re-home and adopt out turtles and tortoises. Reptile books are not as reliable and often have wrong information. Before adopting a turtle or tortoise, you should know how much care these animals really need.

Adopting a Water Turtle

If you decide to adopt a water turtle, plan on giving him or her a home in a pond. Tanks are cruel for these creatures – in the wild, they are used to traveling from pond to pond. They need a safe area, protected from predators like raccoons and dogs. Electric fencing is a good solution, or a screened cover over the pond. These are carnivores, so you

must feed them live food like fish as well as prepared turtle food. Even though they hibernate under water all winter, they need protection from predators during that time, too.

When you adopt, choose a healthy turtle at least four inches in length. Just like any healthy animal, the turtle should have clear eyes and be active. A runny nose or swollen eyes are indicative of a sick turtle. Since water turtles are more likely to carry salmonella, you must wash your hands with warm soapy water if you handle the turtle or the water he/she lives in. If you are conscientious about washing your hands, it is unlikely that you will get sick.

Adopting a Tortoise

Land turtles and tortoises are a different matter altogether. Choose a tortoise that fits your household. For example, small tortoises like Russians or box turtles are suitable for people living in homes with small yards. Both of these hibernate and both like cooler weather. Box turtles are carnivores, so you will have to feed them snails or worms along with some greenery.

If you have more room, a desert, leopard or sulcata tortoise is a good choice. These tortoises are vegetarians. The desert tortoise hibernates, but the other two do not. Because the desert tortoise is endangered or threatened in several states, you will need a permit if you adopt one. It is illegal to adopt them out of the state of origin, so if you live on the East Coast, don't plan on a desert tortoise. In fact, these types of tortoises are all from hot climates, so they don't do well in places with cold winters.

Leopards and sulcatas are called "great" tortoises because they grow very large. They have very different personalities: leopards are bashful, but sulcatas are not. Sulcatas can grow to 200 pounds, so unless you have at least a half-acre fenced in, a sulcata is not a good choice.

Some Recommendations

- While turtles are more likely to carry salmonella, it is best to treat every turtle and tortoise as if they carry it. Good hygiene is important.
- Dogs can be rough on turtles and tortoises, so they should be kept away from the reptile's living area. They can chew the turtle's or tortoise's arms, legs and shell, and can even kill the animal.
- Have a qualified exotic veterinarian check out your new turtle or tortoise to make sure that he/she is healthy and gets a good start in your household.

Finally, remember that you have been entrusted with one of the world's oldest creatures, older even than the dinosaurs. This "rock with legs" has a personality and, just like you and me, wants a warm, clean home and good food. Turtles and tortoises live from 25 to 100 years, so when you make this commitment, it is often for a lifetime.

Susan Tellem is a co-founder of American Tortoise Rescue, a nonprofit that rescues, rehabilitates, adopts, and protects all species of tortoise and turtle. For more information, e-mail American Tortoise Rescue at info@tortoise.com or visit www.tortoise.com or www.turtlehomes.org.