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Introduction to Water Dragon Care

Water dragons are native to Southeast Asia and the Indo-Australian archipelago. They are accustomed to warm temperatures and high humidity. They enjoy swimming and climbing or jumping to and from branches.

This handout is an introduction to the care of water dragons. It will help you avoid some of the common problems encountered by people who have kept water dragons as pets. At the end of this handout are some references for further information.

Housing

The primary goal of the enclosure is to ensure your dragon's safety while providing a clean, comfortable, and roomy living space. Water dragons can reach up to 3 feet in length. The more room they have, the better. They need an enclosure with a minimum side-to-side measurement of twice the pet's length from nose to tail tip. For example, a 3 foot adult needs an enclosure at least 6 feet wide. The depth of the enclosure should be at least half the pet's length from nose to tail tip. Because water dragons like to climb, they appreciate high walls of 4 to 6 feet. An ideal enclosure for a 3 foot adult would be roughly 6'W x 2'D x 5'H.

Water dragons can be kept together. Males tend to get along better with each other than females. Watch your dragons closely to be sure that one dragon is not guarding prime resources such as food and basking spots in order to prevent the other from gaining access.

Regular cleaning of your pet's enclosure is very important. Uneaten food should be removed daily. The cage should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected at least once a week. The cage can be cleaned with a mild soap solution and then disinfected with a solution of ½ cup Clorox bleach in one gallon of water. Your local pet store also carries cleaning solutions specifically designed for reptiles. Betadine, Nolvasan and Roccal are other commercial products that are available for disinfecting. The cage should be RINSED WELL and dried before returning the water dragon to it.

Provide plenty of props in your pet's landscape. Logs, rocks and plants (real or artificial) provide places to exercise and hide. Changing the configuration of these props will help prevent boredom. It is important to clean these props on a regular basis. **WE DO NOT RECOMMEND HEAT ROCKS OF ANY TYPE.** Many reptiles have sustained severe burns do to basking on heat rocks.

Water and Substrate

Water should be available to your water dragon at all times. Create a pool of water covering at least half of the enclosure's floor space. The water needs to be deep enough to allow your dragon to submerge itself and swim comfortably. Branches can be placed over the pool to allow your dragon to dive in from above.

The other half of the enclosure should consist of ground area. Artificial grass or indoor/outdoor carpeting makes a good substrate that is easy to clean. Shredded paper can also be used. Avoid sand, corn cob, wood shavings or bark mulch which can cause an impaction if your water dragon swallows it. Impactions can require surgery to repair and can be a cause of death in a reptile.

Heating and Lighting

A UVA/UVB light should be used 10 or more hours per day all year long. Water Dragons that do not get the amount of UV light they need lose bone density and become susceptible to multiple fractures (similar to osteoporosis in humans.)

Natural sunlight, when available, is a preferred source. Windows (glass) and aquariums filter out much of the beneficial sunlight. Placing the cage or aquarium with a screen top by an opened window or a SAFE place outside for a portion of the day is one option during warm weather. Your water dragon should always have a shaded area to use if he chooses. Giving your water dragon warm and cool areas in his enclosure allows him to regulate his body temperature.

An ultraviolet light that emits both UVA and UVB should be used year round. These bulbs will stop emitting the necessary UV rays long before the bulb itself burns out. Change the UV bulbs at least every six months to be sure your water dragon is getting the rays it needs. UV light is invisible! Your bulb may still emit visible light but not produce any UV light. Date your bulbs and change them every 6 months even if they are still emitting visible light. Note that fluorescent UV lights do not produce heat and must be used in addition to a heat source. Any lights should be placed where your water dragon cannot climb on or come in contact with them.

Diet

Water dragons are primarily carnivores (meat eaters), however, they will eat some greens, vegetables and fruits. It is important to add calcium, vitamin D3 and a multivitamin/mineral supplement to your dragon's food (see below.)

Hatchlings and Juveniles:

Feed your young water dragon every 2 days. Crickets that are 2-3 weeks old are suitable. The crickets you buy should be "gut-loaded" with calcium. Most crickets are sold this way. If your pet store does not "gut load" their crickets for you, purchase an insect food sold for this purpose and follow the directions on the package. (For example, the brand "Gut Load" cricket and insect food by ESU Reptile recommends feeding crickets for 24 hours before offering them to your water dragon.) The crickets you provide for your dragon should be no bigger than the distance between your pet's eyes. Do not feed crickets that are too large for your dragon! Remove any crickets that are not eaten within 10 minutes.

As your dragon grows, offer only slightly larger crickets. You may also add in some mealworms, waxworms, and "pinkie mice" (1 day old baby mice). Remove any crickets that are not eaten within 10 minutes. It is ok to leave live mealworms or wax worms in the enclosure as long as your dragon will eat them within the next 24 hours.

Water dragons need some plant material in their diet, too. Offer finely chopped leafy greens on a daily basis. Examples include: romaine, spring mix, red or green leaf lettuce, dandelion, mustard or collard greens. It is important to vary the greens you supply. This will help to balance the vitamins and minerals in your dragon's diet. Smaller amounts of fresh, finely chopped or grated vegetables can also be offered with the greens. Try cabbage, Napa cabbage, squash, carrots, pasta, Brussels sprout, sweet potatoes, cauliflower, broccoli, green beans, yellow wax beans, bok choy, radish, red/green/yellow bell peppers and kale. Bits of chopped fruits make great treats. Fruit should not be a major component of the diet so be sure to offer them sparingly. Discover your dragon's favorites by trying a variety: apples, bananas, berries, grapes, melon etc.

Be sure to add calcium and a vitamin/mineral supplement to your pet's food. A powdered reptile vitamin supplement should be sprinkled over the food once weekly. All live prey should be lightly dusted with a calcium supplement (without phosphorus) (e.g. Rep-Cal) before feeding them to your dragon.

Adults:

Feed adults once every 3 or 4 days. Offer the same foods as described above for juveniles but increase the size of the crickets and worms accordingly. Adults can also eat older mice and king mealworms. Remember the rule of thumb for cricket size: no bigger than the distance between your dragon's eyes. Crickets need to be "gut-loaded" for adults as well as juveniles. Also, remember to supplement food items with vitamins and minerals as described above.

Taking Your Water Dragon Outdoors

If you would like to bring your pet outside, there are a few things to consider. First, make sure that the temperature will be comfortable (70-90 degrees). Remember that your pet cannot regulate his body temperature by sweating or shivering the way we do. The only way your pet can warm or cool her self is by moving to a warmer or cooler location.

Second, water dragons can move with amazing speed when they want to! They can also climb very well. A cat harness and leash will help avoid the heartbreak of losing your pet when you take her outside. Finally, keep a close eye on your pet, and protect her from contact with predators such as dogs, cats, hawks, etc.

Salmonella

Any reptile may be carrying salmonella, even animals that are perfectly healthy. Many reptiles are persistently infected. This means that they harbor the bacteria in their bodies and at times of stress begin to shed the bacteria into their environment. The most common sources of stress are inappropriate habitats and poor diet. If you follow the guidelines in this handout, you will be doing everything you can to keep your dragons healthy and stress-free. The healthier your pets are, the less the risk that they will shed salmonella.

It is safest, however, to assume that your reptile is always shedding salmonella. Be sure to wash your hands after handling your water dragon. It is especially important to supervise any small children. Prevent access to the enclosure when you are unable to watch them. Children and immunosuppressed individuals are at most risk of serious illness. Instruct older children of the importance of hand washing after touching a reptile or its habitat (ex. water, basking spot, or anything inside of the enclosure).

Other Diseases

Most diseases in water dragons result from dirty enclosures, poor diets, cool temperatures and not enough ultraviolet light. Proper care of your water dragon will greatly reduce the incidence of disease. Diseases in water dragons often come on very slowly. It can be very difficult to detect these diseases before they become advanced.

Knowing what is normal for your dragon is very important. Become familiar with your water dragon's normal appetite, activity level, amount and frequency of urination and defecation, the appearance of waste products, and the overall appearance of your reptile. A change in one of these normal parameters may be a sign of disease. If you notice a change in your water dragon, observe your pet very closely. If the signs or symptoms persist for one or two days, or you notice new signs/symptoms, please call us for an appointment. The sooner we are able to address a problem, the more successful we will be in treating it. Bloody waste products, heavy breathing or panting, seizures, and lameness may suggest an emergency. Call us immediately if you notice any of these.

Preventative Healthcare

We recommend twice yearly exams for juvenile dragons to be sure they are growing as they should. Smaller than expected size in a reptile is often the only clue that they are not as healthy as they should be.

Adult water dragons should come in for yearly checkups. Signs of disease can be subtle and if we catch a problem sooner rather than later, we will have a better chance of successful treatment. At your pet's annual exam, we will check her eyes, ears, nose,

mouth, skin, limbs, heart and lungs, cloaca and general body condition including weight and overall appearance. We will also discuss with you any new information we have regarding water dragon care. Each year there are advancements in the preventive health of these "exotic" animals!

For More Information

We recommend the following book for additional information about the care of your water dragon:

Green Water Dragons by Philippe de Vosjoli
1992 Advanced Vivarium Systems, Inc.

Here is a website with some good information about reptiles in general and also some information about specific species.

www.anaspid.org