

Pitre's Pardalis care sheet for leopard & sulcata tortoises

Opening Statement written by Byron Pitre. "You will quickly see that as you read this care sheet that I promote unconventional methods here at Pitre's Pardalis. After over 2 decades of raising various turtle/tortoise species and trying every "conventional" method out there, I have come to believe that simpler is better. Tortoise babies should be treated as such, babies! Too many people encourage aspects of adult tortoise care on to babies that simply don't work well for babies. Baby tortoises and adult tortoises are two completely different animals (no pun intended) and should be treated as such. The methods I propose are geared toward growing the baby tortoises out of the vulnerable stage (6" and below) as fast as possible. This will help ensure the tortoise's chances of reaching adulthood as a healthy, smooth, robust adult. I can assure you that if you acquire a baby tortoise from a reputable breeder that starts their babies off correctly, and you follow this method, that it will yield incredible results."

1: *Enclosure* - For the first 3-6 months of life I keep my babies in a CLEAR shallow plastic storage container. I use the brand "sterilite" but many other brands can work just fine. The size of the containers should be within 24" in length, and no taller than 8-10". One key component is to have a CLEAR lid so light can permeate from all angles. But having the entire bin clear is ideal. The size of the container should be limited that way the baby is ALWAYS NEAR FOOD. Some conventional set ups are so large that the baby has to journey for its food which should not be the case. Storage containers are NOT airtight so the lid should be kept on the container virtually 24/7. Placing 4 holes in the lid at all 4 corners is suggested. This helps keep very stable ambient temperatures, humidity levels, and restricts rapid changes in air flow. I feel that the lid helps provide a mental stability to the babies that will enable them to eat without distraction or fear of predation (humans can trigger this fear at first). So although it's a clear bin, it's still enough of a visual barrier that it creates the feeling of security. Does UVB get through the lid? The answer is likely no, but you will see in the following segments how I feel about the necessity of UVB and how I accomplish my babies getting it.

One big bonus to these smaller plastic enclosures is the portability benefit. You can easily move the bin wherever you might need without hindering the babies "immediate surroundings". So for journeys onto a back patio, or outside when the weather permits, is quite easy and still mentally stable for the baby. Babies tend to panic when put into totally new foreign surroundings like an open lawn or new outdoor pen and will sometimes totally stop feeding.

Of course, the lid should come off when experiencing direct sunlight to avoid overheating. It really becomes ideal in the late spring/summertime when the tortoise can get the benefit of

direct sun without a dramatic change in its surroundings. This is another reason why the bin should not be taller than 8-10" because any taller and DIRECT sunlight will have a harder time reaching the baby because of the angle of the sun and the height of the bin. 6" tall containers are ideal.

2: *Substrate* - After years of trying everything from cypress mulch, coco coir, topsoil, sphagnum moss, etc. I have concluded that slightly moist paper towels are the best substrate for a young tortoise. The reasons for this are countless in my opinion. Some people have a hard time regulating the humidity levels in their conventional enclosures and humidity is definitely an essential ingredient to healthy growth and should never be avoided. Moist paper towels will actually "stick" to the bottom on the plastic bin and will slowly release moisture creating a humid environment. Being that the lid stays on the moisture cannot escape so this eliminates the necessity for spraying additional water or fogging. I typically will place 4 layers of paper towels in the bin before sprinkling water on top of them causing them to stick. I can easily regulate how damp they are with the amount of water added.

I feel that paper towels are the safest substrate because of how sanitary they are in comparison to other options. Paper towels will never possibly contain bacteria, mold, insects, etc. that are invisible in other options but could potentially harm a baby's vulnerable immune system. Plus, if accidentally ingested, paper towels will easily pass through the digestive tract with zero negative effects. They allow you to easily monitor the natural waste (pee/poo) of your baby vs other substrates where you can't tell how often the babies are pee/pooing.

Food can simply be placed on the paper towels. Providing a food dish is fine as well, but then it would also be one more thing to clean or replace. I opt to place the food directly on the paper towels since the paper towels are replaced regularly.

The clean-up factor is really a huge benefit. It's INCREDIBLY easy to simply remove the paper towels prior to them reaching an unsanitary state. I then wash the bin with warm water and dawn soap to remove any possible bacteria. And then repeat the initial steps of adding new paper towels. This method really ensures that bacteria/mold build up can simply never occur. But replacing the bin itself every 2-3 months would only cost \$5-10 which is worth it. With one 1-3 tortoises you would expect to do this paper towel replacement every 3-5 days. You should attempt to get paper towels void of any pattern. Plain white Bounty "select a size" is what I use.

3: *Lighting* - Lighting consist of two sources. Because I use aluminum racks to place my bins on, I'm able to use simple "clamp lamp" type lights with simple 75w-100w light bulbs place over the far end of the enclosure, roughly 12" above the bin. This provides light, but also enough warmth. I also hang a Zoomed T5 uvb light that puts off very little heat but serves as an available UVB source from simply removing the lid of the enclosure.

This next statement is important. I provide light for young tortoises 24/7. They never experience a true "night cycle" in the sense of it being totally dark. I provide a "brighter" portion of the day between 8am-8pm with the clamp lamp being turned on, but light is ALWAYS present from the T5 light. This enables the baby to eat whenever it may desire, and it DOES NOT hinder the tortoise's ability to sleep/rest. The light from the T5 light is not strong enough to create enough light to prevent the tortoise from simply hiding in a corner and closing its eyes to rest. Babies are often found eating at any given hour of day or night when light is present. Baby tortoises should be doing three things very well to grow out of the vulnerable stage. 1: Eat 2: Sleep 3: Repeat!

4: *Temperature* - I choose to keep my ambient temps in the enclosure roughly 85-88 degrees. I think temps should never go below 83 degrees for the first 6months of life. With the clamp light over one far side of the bin it does create a "warmer side" and not necessarily a "hot spot". I do not think "hot spots" are good for very young tortoises. The warmer side of the bin should read 88-92 degrees or so. With the clamp light turning off around 8pm the bin should still stay 83-85 degrees from the low heat from the T5 light, provided it's within 12" of the bin.

5: *Humidity* - As stated in section 2, the moist paper towels keep the humidity levels high within the enclosures. Being the lid is almost always on, the high humidity level is super easy to achieve. I encourage humidity levels no less than 80%. This will be important to provide until the tortoise is 6" or greater to ensure the shell grows in a smooth uniform manner into adulthood. The humidity also helps to keep the food fresh vs drying out quickly in an open-air enclosure.

6: *Hydration* - Babies younger than 4-6 months should be soaked at least 4-5 times a week in "shower" warm water. Room temperature water should be avoided throughout the

entire duration of the soak and luke warm will not yield the same benefits as “shower” warm. If the water isn’t warm enough for someone to shower in then IMO the water isn’t warm enough. Preferably the baby should be soaked every day, and in the morning if possible. This morning soaking should help stimulate the tortoise’s activity and encourage better feeding. Plus it helps to eliminate waste within the enclosure because most tortoises will poop/pee in the soak every other soak or so. I recommend cleaning the soaking pan with a safe soap and hot water after each and every soak to eliminate the possibility of bacterial build up. The water level should be slightly beneath the chin of tortoise in a normal resting position. Water too deep can cause a panic reaction. I recommend using “oil pans” that are used for doing oil changes and are very inexpensive to purchase and easy to clean. They are a few dollars at any Walmart type store or automotive part store. As the tortoise grows the amount of soaking per week can diminish. Once they reach 3-4 inches in length soaking them a few times a week is sufficient.

7: *Diet* This topic is one of great debate throughout the hobby. I will not get into refuting why certain diets actually don’t work well but I will state this fact. HAY IS NOT MEANT TO BE FED TO BABY TORTOISES! For far too long people have falsely reported that hay should be practically forced into the diet of baby tortoises which couldn’t be further from the truth. A baby tortoise’s digestive track is NOT DESIGNED FOR HAY. It’s designed for young fresh tender greens/grasses/weeds etc. NOT BIG BULKY DRY HAY. Rant over

I feed my babies no less than 2-3 items on a daily basis. I like to have 3-4 food options present at all time. This means food is present for my babies 24/7. Fresh food is added twice a day. My main 5 items that I fed are romaine, turnip greens, kale, collard greens, green leaf lettuce, etc. Unlike some in the industry, I don’t suggest starting babies on a diet of strictly weeds/grasses etc. The main reason being is that more palatable options (grocery greens) encourage feeding and consumption in higher amounts which leads to better growth rates. Sometimes weeds and grasses are gathered at too late of a stage in their own growth cycle and the palatability (taste) of the grasses/weeds are far less than what a baby tortoise might desire to eat. And a secondary reason is that food taken from wild sources outside might actually contain small traces of bird poop, insects, bacteria, etc. that could potentially harm a very young tortoise’s not yet developed digestive/immune system. If an owner chooses to grow their own “wild greens” in a controlled environment that would yield much better results for the consumption of items such as clover, dandelion, various grasses, plantain, etc.

Mazuri diet (the original formula) is offered once a week or so after the babies have established themselves in a new home. Once the baby has reached 4-6” in length I will increase the Mazuri

intake to 2-4 offerings a week. Mazuri should not be the sole item offered to a baby tortoise IMO and should not be smeared on top of other food. Mazuri older than 8-10hrs should be removed from the enclosure to eliminate potential mold or stale items to be consumed.

Adult tortoises are a totally different animal, no pun intended.

Because the containers have the lids on, the food actually stays MUCH FRESHER for MUCH LONGER than in open air enclosures. This help maintains a better palatability for the food items, thus creating a better longer feeding response.

8: *Stages of life* My main goal as a tortoise caretaker is to grow a tortoise out of its “vulnerable stage (4”and below)” as QUICKLY as possible. Once a tortoise reaches the 4” mark the success rate leading up to adulthood goes up dramatically. There are a few within the hobby that still promote slow growth as beneficial even though there is ZERO EVIDENCE to support this. This “slow growth” idea is truly tortoise folklore and is starting to phase out from the husbandry culture. Tortoises in the wild can AND DO go through rapid growth periods when conditions are favorable for an extended period of time.

Between 4”-8” the tortoise’s ability to handle extended periods of outside time and temperature fluctuations increases. During this stage tortoises can spend 6-8 hours or so outside provided the temperatures are above 70 degrees with adequate sunshine. I avoid putting juvenile tortoises outside during cool temperatures, very windy days, or days with intense rainfall. Cold wet periods are NOT GOOD for a tortoise at any stage of its life and some people are too quick to place their tortoise outside full time without providing a safe/dry/heated retreat when conditions aren’t favorable. I still bring tortoises inside during the night when they are in this stage to provide a long period of nice/warm/stable conditions.

Once a tortoise reaches 8” and above they really can thrive outside full time with a heated retreat available for times of unfavorable conditions. Although the grazing habits are fully developed at this point, I do still supplement their diets with various grocery/garden greens 2-3 times a week and/or mazuri 2-3 times a week. This helps sustain good steady growth during very hot periods where grass becomes less palatable or cold periods where grass is all but dead.

I do like to soak my juveniles and adults once a month or so to ensure they are fully hydrated since they can retain fluids for very very long periods of time. Placing out water trays can work well provided they are cleaned out periodically to eliminate any possible bacteria build up.

9: *Cleaning* Sanitation in the early stages of development is CRITICAL. Although I touched on sanitation aspects early on in this care sheet I will reiterate. Baby tortoises that are healthy and eating well will waste MUCH much more than people can imagine. This can lead to bacterial build up in enclosure if they are not cleaned on a regular basis. Everything that the tortoise comes into contact with should be cleaned regularly. The container/enclosure, the water tray (if ones provided), the food tray (if provided), and the soaking tray should all be cleaned at least weekly. I believe my methods described above actual minimize the possibility of bacterial/sanitation issues much better than other husbandry methods.