

Tortoise Hatchling Daily Care - Darrell Senneke

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There is much more to daily care with hatchlings than just cleaning water dishes and putting food in with them. A wide range of practices should become part of your daily regimen.

The first thing that should be done every morning is to make sure the lights are working and directed correctly. Remember the basking light should be directed to the far corner away from the hide box. Also check the sub tank heater if you use one to make sure it is working if the ambient temperature is low, or turned off if the ambient temperature is above 70 degrees F (21 degrees C).

Next remove the hatchling for its morning soak. As you do this observe its condition. This is your opportunity to catch any problems early.

Before we go on to the observations is important that you know what exactly you will do in the event that you have a problem. There is some first aid information on this site but it is meant as information that you can use until you get into see a veterinarian in the event of an emergency. It is sad but true that most veterinarians receive little or no instruction in the treatment of reptiles. Because of this fact it is necessary that you have your veterinarian picked out prior to any problems. The best way to find a veterinarian that is competent treating tortoises is by joining a herpetological society and asking the more experienced people for their recommendations.

Observations to make on a daily basis:

1. Is the hatchling's activity level the same as normal? It is typical for a sick tortoise to sit half in and half out of its basking spot. A healthy tortoise is mobile; it moves in and out of the hot spot and utilizes the temperature gradient. Is it just sitting in one medium warm spot and not moving? This could be an early warning sign.
2. How do its eyes look? Are its eyes clear and shiny or are they clouded or glassy looking? Does the tortoise have difficulty opening them? Looking into the eyes of a tortoise will often tell you something is wrong early on. Often this may not be evident unless you have been interacting with and observing the animal since you acquired it.
3. Is its breathing normal? It is not uncommon for a young tortoise to pump its head and front legs a bit when breathing. It is NOT typical for there to be any bubbling from its nose or sneezing evident. Wheezing is something to be concerned about as well though I have seen individuals that have had cultures done because they wheezed only to have the results come back negative. BUT! In general terms wheezing IS a symptom of a possible problem.
4. What does the shell look and feel like? Is it firm or soft and spongy? Tortoise hatchlings shells firm up quite soon after hatching and a soft shell is always an indication of a problem if the tortoise is more than a month or so old. The exception to this, of course, is pancake tortoises, which have softer shells throughout their lives. Softness in the shell is usually manifested first in the plastron.
5. While you are feeling for the firmness of the shell look at it. Is it as shiny as normal? Has it lost its luster? This could be an indication of a future problem. Are there any spots or areas that are very dull looking or hazy looking? Caught early enough problems such as these can be dealt with easily, allowed to linger and they can be disfiguring or life threatening.

6. Notice any peculiar smell? While it is difficult to quantify, one of our most sensitive senses is our sense of smell. Because you have been dealing with this animal on a daily basis you should have become aware of his typical odor. To me this is sort of an old abandoned barn smell. If his odor is different than normal something could be wrong. This sort of thing is hard to explain to a veterinarian but experienced tortoise keepers will understand and be able to advise you in this event.

7. How do the beak and claws look? Is it time for a trim? If it is I suggest the first time you do it to get help from someone experienced with the techniques. Trimming is not overly difficult but when actually doing it the first time you should watch someone else or have him or her instruct you.

8. Put the tortoise in very shallow tepid water. While it is soaking clean the habitat. Remove any feces along with any uneaten food from the previous day. The water dish should be removed and cleaned or replaced with another clean dish. If the substrate smells anything but fresh it is time to change it or remove the offending material.

9. After the tortoise has soaked for 10 minutes or so check the results. Did it defecate? If it did was the consistency firm or runny? If it was runny the tortoise may need more roughage in its diet and less leafy greens and fruits. The best way to tune the diet for your tortoise apart from reading books and studies from the experts is to watch the poop and strive for firm results. If you see whitish semi-solid material do not worry. This material is called urates and is considered perfectly natural from time to time.

10. Now place the tortoise back into its habitat and feed it. Watch it eat. Is it eating as it normally does? Remember any change in its daily pattern could be an early warning.

11. Once every week or so you should weigh your hatchling on the most accurate balance available. A ten percent weight loss in a week could be a warning sign, it could also just mean that it had a very good bowel movement. Keep records and look for trends. A steady weight loss IS a problem. Too rapid weight gain is also a problem. Take regular SCL (straight carapace length) measurements. What you want to attain is SLOW, NATURAL GROWTH. If all this sounds like a lot of work, perhaps a tortoise hatchling is not for you. I can tell you that it takes a lot longer to talk about the daily regimen than it does to do it, but these animals are not low maintenance pets. Properly maintained CB (captive bred) hatchlings can outlive you and maybe your kids as well. Improperly maintained they suffer a very sad death.

It should be noted that turtle and tortoise care research is ongoing. As new information becomes available we share this on the World Chelonian Trust web site at www.chelonia.org. Serious keepers find it to be a benefit to have the support of others who keep these species. Care is discussed in our free online email community, which may be joined from the web address above. Please contact us about the many benefits of becoming a member of the World Chelonian Trust.

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