**Sulcata Tortoise (Centrochylys sulcata) Care Guide**
*A Comprehensive Overview for Responsible Ownership*

Sulcata tortoises are large, terrestrial reptiles native to the southern edge of the Sahara Desert in Africa. They are known for their long lifespans, substantial size, and unique personalities. Proper husbandry is essential for promoting long-term health and well-being.

**Quick Reference**

* **Enclosure Size**:
*Hatchlings*: 36” x 18” minimum indoor enclosure
*Juveniles to Adults*: Outdoor pens preferred with at least a half-acre of land. Indoor pens should be a minimum of 8 ft x 4 ft.
* **Temperatures**:
*Daytime ambient*: 80–90°F Make sure there is access to shade.
*Basking spot*: 100–110°F
*Nighttime minimum*: Not below 70°F for juveniles; adults tolerate low 60s if dry. Bring indoors when temperatures drops below that.
* **Humidity**:
*Hatchlings*: 50–70% to prevent pyramiding
*Adults*: 40–60%, always with a dry basking area. Make sure they have access to large shallow water areas.
* **Substrate**:
Indoors - Coconut coir, organic topsoil, or cypress mulch mixed with play sand. Substrate should allow burrowing and hold moisture without becoming soggy.
* **Diet**:
Primarily high-fiber, low-protein grasses and hays. Supplement with dark leafy greens. Avoid fruit, animal protein, and high-oxalate vegetables like spinach and kale.
* **Water**:
Fresh water should always be available in a shallow dish. Juveniles should be soaked in shallow warm water 3–4 times a week.
* **Shelter/Hide**:
Provide access to a hide or burrow to retreat from heat and to feel secure. Outdoor shelters must be insulated and heated in cooler climates.

***DETAILED CARE GUIDELINES***

**Housing and Space Requirements**

Sulcata tortoises grow rapidly and require significant space. While hatchlings can be housed indoors in a secure enclosure, adults must be moved outdoors as they mature. Outdoor pens should be secure, escape-proof, and provide a variety of terrain for exploration, grazing, and digging. They will also need access to water, tunnels or a lean-to, to prove shade and cooler temperatures to regulate their body temperature.

Tortoises are powerful diggers and may attempt to burrow under fencing. Barriers should extend at least 12 inches below ground. If housed indoors, the enclosure must allow sufficient room for movement and should include appropriate lighting and basking areas.

**Indoor Temperature and Heating**

Sulcatas are ectothermic and require a temperature gradient to self-regulate their body temperature when kept indoors.

* **Basking Zone**: Provide a basking area of 100–110°F using an overhead heat lamp or ceramic heat emitter.
* **Ambient Temperature**: The rest of the enclosure should remain between 80–90°F during the day.
* **Nighttime Temperature**: Should not drop below 70°F for juveniles. Dry, insulated housing allows adults to tolerate slightly lower temperatures.

UVB lighting is essential for indoor housing and must be available 10–12 hours per day to support vitamin D3 synthesis and calcium absorption. Mercury vapor bulbs or linear T5 UVB bulbs are recommended.

**Humidity and Hydration**

While sulcatas originate from arid regions, hatchlings require moderate humidity to develop properly and avoid shell deformities such as pyramiding.

* **Hatchlings**: Maintain humidity levels of 50–70%. Daily soaks in warm water (15–20 minutes) are crucial.
* **Adults**: Require less ambient humidity but must have access to a water source and an environment that allows them to rehydrate as needed.

Always provide a dry area under the heat source where the tortoise can fully dry out after soaking or exposure to humidity.

**Diet and Feeding**

Sulcata tortoises are grazing herbivores. A proper diet consists of:

* **Primary Diet**: Grasses, hay (e.g., timothy, orchard), and edible weeds like dandelion and clover.
* **Supplemental Greens**: Mustard greens, collard greens, escarole, turnip greens (rotate regularly).
* **Avoid**: Fruits, grains, legumes, and vegetables high in oxalates (e.g., spinach, kale, beet greens).
* **Calcium Supplementation**: Required several times per week, especially for juveniles. Use a phosphorus-free calcium powder or offer cuttlebone.

Feed daily and allow tortoises to graze naturally outdoors.

**Enrichment and Environmental Stimulation**

Sulcatas benefit from varied terrain and safe objects to explore. Their environment should encourage natural behaviors, including grazing, burrowing, and basking.

* **Enrichment Items**: Mounds of dirt or sand, safe logs or branches, shaded areas, and visual barriers.
* **Burrows and Hides**: Provide shaded, cool burrowing areas or insulated hides. In cold climates, heated tortoise houses are required.

**Lifespan and Size**

Sulcata tortoises are long-lived, with lifespans commonly exceeding 70 years under proper care. They are among the largest tortoises in the world, with adult weights of 80–150+ pounds and lengths over 24 inches. Prospective keepers must prepare for the long-term commitment and significant space requirements.

**Handling and Temperament**

Sulcatas are generally active during the day and may display inquisitive, bold personalities. They are not naturally aggressive but may become territorial, especially males. Hatchlings can be skittish but typically adapt to gentle interaction over time.

* Handle young tortoises gently and infrequently to avoid stress.
* Avoid picking up large tortoises unless necessary—they are heavy and may be injured if dropped.

**Bringing Home a New Tortoise**

When bringing a new Sulcata home, allow the tortoise to adjust quietly to its new environment for 7–10 days. During this period, you should observe from a distance and avoid handling. Gradual acclimation helps reduce stress and supports long-term health. Make sure your new Sulcata is eating and drinking appropriately before starting interactions.

**Final Notes**

Sulcata tortoises are rewarding but demanding reptiles that require a significant investment of time, space, and resources. Before acquiring one, ensure that you are prepared to meet their needs for decades. When provided with proper care, these tortoises can thrive and become engaging lifelong companions.

**Disclaimer:** This guide represents general best practices for Sulcata tortoises. Individual needs may vary based on age, temperament, and how the husbandry needs are met. Continue researching from a variety of credible sources, consult experienced keepers, and be open to adapting your methods over time.