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Water Dragon: Care and Husbandry

Chinese water dragons originate from tropical areas of Southeast Asia. They can live an average of 10-15 years. Males reach approximately 36 inches in length while females reach approximately 24 inches in length. Water dragons have a triangular head and are dark forest green to light green in color with vertical stripes running down their sides and a line of small crests down their backs. They have very muscular rear legs that aid in climbing, leaping and swimming. They also have very powerful tails which aid in maintaining balance and swimming and also serves as a defense mechanism against predators.



Your water dragon should be handled daily to keep him or her socialized. A water dragon should never be picked up by its tail. Use two hands for support and scoop him or her from underneath.

Water dragons are arboreal meaning they enjoy a tall enclosure with plenty of branches and vines to for climbing. The ideal dragon habitat is a large enclosure (often custom made) at least 6 feet long, 2-3 feet deep and 5-6 feet tall. If the enclosure is made of glass you will need to line the sides of the cage with a visual barrier such as paper or plants. This will help your dragon feel safer and help prevent damage to its snout. If your dragon can see out or can see its reflection it will run at the glass causing damage to its nose. Constant banging into the sides of the enclosure may also be a sign that a dragon's enclosure is too small.

Male water dragons can be territorial and therefore should not be housed together. Females can be housed together and tend to get along better than males. Water dragons should not be housed with different species of reptiles due to the risk of fighting and the possibility of disease transmission.

Substrate for the bottom of your enclosure can include paper towels, newspaper, butcher paper, terrarium liners, rabbit alfalfa food pellets or recycled paper products.

Calcium sand is not a good choice because it can be ingested which may cause intestinal impaction. Wood shavings, walnut shells and sand are all inappropriate choices as these can be harmful if ingested, can carry parasites and irritating dusts and oils. The enclosure should be cleaned regularly usually once weekly will suffice; with water and a mild soap. Your water dragon will also need a shelter or hiding house. Artificial plants and decorations may be used to create a more natural looking habitat, just be sure that your dragon is not ingesting these decorations. Consult your veterinarian before using live plants in your enclosure as some can be toxic.

Water dragons originate from tropical humid areas and require 80% humidity measured with a hygrometer purchased from your local pet store. Your water dragon will also like to swim so you should provide a water dish large enough for your dragon to swim around and deep enough to allow your dragon to submerge 50% of its body height. This water source will help maintain the humidity level in your dragon's enclosure; however it is also necessary to mist the enclosure and use a misting system, fogging system or waterfall to keep the humidity at the appropriate level.

A heat lamp, ceramic heat emitter is important to maintain the appropriate temperature. The ideal temperature for a water dragon is 84-90 degrees Fahrenheit with one side being slightly cooler (about 5 degrees) than the other. This difference in temperature allows your water dragon to cool off and avoid overheating. These temperatures are monitored with two thermometers, one on each side of the cage. Your dragon should have 12 hours of daylight (white light) and 12 hours of darkness for its natural biorhythms. A timer purchased from a pet supply store or hardware store can be utilized to maintain this twelve hour light cycle. At night, the temperature in the enclosure should drop slightly, about 10 degrees, as it would in their natural habitat. Night temperatures should also be closely monitored and ceramic heat emitters, red, blue or purple reptile night bulbs can aid in increasing night temperatures if needed. Always use reptile specific heat bulbs which have modifications that benefit the reptile and helps stimulates eating.

An ultraviolet light is essential for the health of water dragons. This reptile specific bulb produces UVA and UVB rays and is purchased from your local pet supply store. The UVB rays are important for the natural production of vitamin D which helps the dragon absorb calcium from its diet. Without the UV bulb your dragon cannot properly absorb calcium which leads to metabolic bone disease. UV bulbs for reptiles come in two different forms the compact (coil) bulb and the linear florescent tube. While there are many companies that produce UV bulbs, Zoo Med and Zilla are recommended. Follow manufacturer recommendations to determine the type of UV bulb you purchase, and the distance to place the bulb from your water dragon. All UV bulbs need to be changed every 6-12 months based on manufacturer's recommendations. After that time, even if the bulb still turns on it is not producing the vital rays your dragon needs for calcium metabolism. Plastic and glass windows are designed to block UVB rays so keeping the tank by a window will not provide essential UVB rays. It is ideal to provide monitored time outside on a warm day in an escape proof enclosure with access to shelter. Natural sunlight is the best source of essential UV rays.

Heat rocks should not be used as they can cause burns since reptiles do not sense a "localized" temperature. Heating pads under the tank may be used with supervision. Place your hand on the area of the tank with the heating pad; if it is too hot for your hand to rest on for long periods of time then it is too hot for your water dragon.

Hibernation can be dangerous to your dragon if not done properly and therefore should only be attempted by an experienced keeper with aid from your veterinarian. Hibernation is an instinctual act, usually during the cooler months, during which your dragon's appetite and activity will drastically decrease. This act is stimulated by your dragon's natural instincts along with differences in the temperature of the environment and the shortening of days. Maintaining the same temperature and light cycle in your enclosure during the winter months will help prevent hibernation.

Water dragons are primarily insectivores but will sometimes eat fruits and vegetables. Their diet mostly consists of insects. It is important to vary the diet. Safe live foods include gut loaded crickets, mealworms, hornworms, silkworms, earthworms, butterworms, red worms, small goldfish, rosie fish. Pre-killed pinkie mice may be offered to adults. Wax worms can be very fattening and superworms are hard to digest so these should be offered more as treats. Insects should be gut loaded, meaning they were fed nutritious food before being fed to your water dragon. Options of gut loading food are available at your local pet store. Only put enough live food in the cage as your water dragon will eat at one time, as an insect left in the cage will get hungry and may munch on your water dragon. Insects should not be larger than $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ the size of the space between your water dragon's eyes; larger than this may cause your water dragon to choke. Your water dragon should never be fed bugs found outside as these run the risk of being contaminated with pesticides, parasites and diseases. A commercial water dragon food may be found at your local pet store. The best time to feed your dragon is in the morning after it has had a few hours to warm up.

Appropriate greens to offer your dragon include dandelion greens, collard greens, chickory greens, turnip greens, escarole, endive, romaine, mustard and turnip greens. Iceberg lettuce has no nutritional value and should not be fed. Spinach, broccoli, cauliflower and cabbage cannot be fed as they contain oxalates that bind calcium intake. Vegetables can include green beans, peas, cucumber, zucchini, green peppers and bell peppers. Orange veggies such as carrots, squash and sweet potatoes are very good sources of vitamin A. Fruits such as strawberries, apples, grapes, cantaloupe, papaya, mango, blueberries, bananas and berries may be offered as treats. Avocado and rhubarb should be avoided.

Water dragons do not produce enough calcium themselves and therefore it must be supplemented in their food. This can be done by purchasing a calcium D3 powder from your local area pet store. This powder is sprinkled on food 3-4 times a week for juvenile water dragons (under one year old) or breeding females and 2-3 times a week for adult dragons. It can be applied to live food by placing the food and powder in a bag and lightly shaking until the insects are covered.

An annual examination with a qualified reptile veterinarian is important to ensure your water dragon is in good health. Reptiles are very good at hiding when they are sick this

is an instinctive behavior. It is very important to see a qualified veterinarian as soon as you notice your dragon acting abnormal. Common conditions affecting water dragons include impactions, metabolic bone disease, parasites, respiratory infections, mites, abscesses, mouth rot and rostral snout damage.