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Iguanas

Natural Habitat

Green iguanas are commonly found throughout Central and South America. Green iguanas, as their name implies, are green. This allows them to camouflage well with their surroundings. Most iguanas live in tropical rainforests. They are most comfortable climbing up tall trees and hiding among foliage; however, if threatened, they are known to dive into water and are quite adept at swimming. They can grow to be between 4 and 6 feet long. When in captivity, they require large amounts of space, special lighting, and lots of care, so generally they are not suitable as a beginner's pet. In fact, iguanas are the most abandoned reptiles in the United States, so it is imperative that owners do research into the commitment and care that iguanas require before adopting one.

Housing

Iguanas are very sensitive to changes in their environment, so it is important that you provide your iguana with a very controlled stable environment. Most iguanas require large cages that have plenty of room for climbing and exploring. We recommend that your iguana be kept on a 12-hour light/dark cycle so that it receives ultraviolet (UVB) at least 12 hours a day. UVB light should not be farther than 12 inches away from the iguana. The best resource for these lights can be found at www.reptileuv.com. This company offers the best and cheapest lights available.

Temperature

Iguanas are ectothermic, meaning that they rely on their environment to regulate their temperature. Iguanas require a high ambient temperature in their terraria (basking spot 95°F to 100°F, the rest of the cage 80°F to 85°F). Iguanas also need high humidity in their cage, which should be kept at around 70% (this will help to prevent poor shedding and kidney disease). You can increase the humidity in the cage by providing your iguana with a large pool of water (at least $\frac{2}{3}$ the size of the enclosure), or by purchasing a mister. You should mist your iguana at least twice a day to increase the humidity and to promote skin health.

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic
Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3

Diet

Iguanas are herbivores that should be provided daily with a variety of leafy green vegetables high in calcium, such as kale, turnip greens, collards, chard, dandelions, parsley, and spinach, as well as a very small amount of fruits such as bananas, melons, apples, and strawberries. We would not recommend feeding your iguana bread, pancakes, or eggs, because iguanas are herbivores and have no need for processed foods. Some iguanas can become very picky eaters if they are introduced to human processed foods, so it is best to provide your iggie with a balanced diet of fresh veggies and fruits and to avoid letting it get addicted to the "sweet stuff," because this could lead to nutritional and metabolic diseases down the road. To avoid feeding your iguana a diet that is deficient in calcium, you can obtain a calcium carbonate supplement that you can put into its food to ensure that your iguana gets the calcium it needs. We recommend the vitamin/mineral supplement from ZooMed called Reptivite. ZooMed also produces some UVB lights. You can view products from this company on the Internet at <http://www.zoomed.com/>.

Handling

Iguana owners should learn to read their pet's body language because it can provide hints as to whether the iguana is friendly or is about to attack. Iguanas use their tails as their first line of defense when they feel threatened. When handling an iguana, you should always be cognizant of where its tail is, so that you can avoid being struck. Iguanas should be held with two hands; it is useful to support their body weight with one palm under the belly and to use your other hand to secure the shoulders and neck. In this position, you can tuck your iguana's tail under the arm that is supporting its body, so that the tail is held securely against you. Iguanas can bite and have strong jaws and sharp teeth. If you feel threatened by your iguana, never put your fingers where it can bite you. Iguanas have long fingers and claws that help them to climb; unfortunately, your iguana may inadvertently scratch you if you allow it to climb around on your body. Most iguanas that are well socialized can become very tame and friendly with their handlers.

Behavior

In general, iguanas have become popular pets because of their calm disposition and friendliness toward humans. Iguanas use many behavioral signs to interact with humans and their environment. They use dewlaps, tongue flicking, head bobbing, and hissing to communicate, and owners should learn to read their individual iguana's body language. Iguanas are diurnal, meaning that they are awake and alert during the day and rest at night; it is recommended that they be on a 12-hour light/dark cycle to ensure adequate UVB exposure.

Lifespan

Iguanas have a lifespan of approximately 12 years (7 to 15 years).

Common Medical Conditions

- *Kidney disease.* Many iguanas develop and die from kidney disease as they get older. The best ways to keep your iguana's kidneys healthy is to provide your pet with proper humidity, plenty of access to fresh water (Iguanas are avid swimmers in the wild; providing your iguana with an area in which to swim is ideal, and at minimum, your iguana should be provided with enough water to soak in.), and proper nutrition. It is also recommended that geriatric iguanas have regularly scheduled veterinarian appointments for blood work to catch kidney disease before it has progressed.

Information cited from:

Mayer, J and Donnelly, T., eds. Clinical Veterinary Advisor: Birds and Exotic Pets. Elsevier, Philadelphia, PA. 2013. ISBN: 9781-4160-3969-3

- *Metabolic bone disease (MBD)*. Diets that are deficient in calcium or vitamin D3 may lead to a specific type of metabolic bone disease called nutritional secondary hyperparathyroidism. This can be caused by feeding diets low in calcium or high in phosphorus and by lack of exposure to UVB light. Symptoms reflect demineralization of bone and include fractures, skeletal deformities, weak eggshells, and possibly muscle tremors and seizures. Iguanas with MBD often have a thin abdomen and visible ribs, crooked-looking spines, and very beefy legs—"Popeye" appearance. A common cause of MBD in iguanas is inappropriate feeding of iceberg lettuce. Iceberg lettuce has almost no nutritional value and should not be fed to iguanas; iguanas should be fed green leafy vegetables high in calcium (see earlier for additional information on nutrition). To avoid feeding your iguana a diet that is deficient in calcium, you can obtain a calcium carbonate supplement that you can put into its food to ensure that your iguana gets the calcium it needs.
- Wrongful shedding. A healthy iguana should shed all of its skin during one period. If it fails to shed all of its skin during a moult, this is called wrongful shedding, or dysecdysis. Iguanas normally shed in multiple small pieces, but when an iguana does not shed parts of its skin completely, bands of tissue that constrict around parts of the toes or tail can be retained. This can lead to reduced blood flow to these appendages and can actually cause amputation of the ends of the extremities. Although iguanas shed in multiple pieces, it is imperative that all pieces come off within the shedding period. If pieces of retained tissue are left on your iguana, they can lead to bacterial and fungal infections. Many causes of wrongful shedding are known, but low temperatures, inappropriate humidity, and lack of access to water (for soaking) are very common causes in iguanas.

A very good resource about iguanas is www.anapsid.org. We also recommend a good book on iguana husbandry: *Green Iguana: The Ultimate Owner's Manual*, by James W. Hatfield III.

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