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Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*)

*Also “Red Iguanas” and “Blue Iguanas”

Green, but Not Always Mean

The green iguana is a large iguanid lizard indigenous to much of Central and South America that ranges from green, olive green, brown, or sometimes reddish in color, sometimes with darker reddish-brown bands along the side, and dark bands on the tail. They also have a series of tall dorsal spines and crests which are often more prominent on mature adult males, and very distinguishable jowels and dewlaps, which are also much more pronounced on male iguanas. These spines are used for a variety of purposes, including defense, as well as signaling territorial ranges, dominance, and as sexual displays. Green iguanas can also occur in several color phases depending on their locality and populations, with “red iguanas” being reddish, reddish-orange, to orangeish-brown, while “blue iguanas”, not to be confused with some *Cyclura iguana* species, can be a lighter teal to turquoise blue or bluish-green. A large, loose dewlap, distinctive jowls, and single row of dorsal spines also characterize the green iguana. Like some other lizards, in addition to having keen vision allowing them to detect predators, green iguanas also have a vestigial third eye atop their heads that detect changes in overhead light, and which act as photosensory organs. Green iguanas are an arboreal to semi-arboreal species, where they will often bask, thermoregulate, and forage for food both in trees and vegetation, as well as on the ground often near water. As with many other lizards, iguanas also utilize a variety of behavioral traits as defensive mechanisms to avoid predation or being eaten, as well as to signal territory, dominance, disposition, and in sexual displays, and these behaviors can include head bobbing, extending their throat dewlaps, gaping and hissing, and other such forms of posturing.

When it comes to their care and husbandry in captivity, green iguanas have long been a widespread and popular larger pet lizard species due to their size, colors, and/or temperaments, with as many as 800,000 or more being kept and imported each year. However, their husbandry certainly can often provide challenges for many, and their proper diet, housing and enclosure, heating and lighting, and other factors are an absolute must! ***While Green iguanas are very popular reptile pets, researching their potential adult size, husbandry, and housing needs beforehand should be an absolute requirement given these animals. Given proper care, green iguanas can live for 15 to 25 years or more and should not be viewed as cheap or disposable pets, as has often been the case with keeping this amazing species in captivity historically.***

Green iguana care is not simple by any means, and this care sheet should not be considered complete or exhaustive, but rather a starting guide to the essentials and the basics. Please see the additional resources and information for far more detailed aspects of green iguana husbandry.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum/Sub Phylum: Chordata/Vertebrata

Class: Reptilia

Order: Squamata

Suborder: Lacertilia

Infraorder: Iguania

Family: Iguanidae

Genus: Iguana

Species: *Iguana iguana**

**Taxonomy subject to change and revision.*

Lifespan and Longevity

Given the correct care and husbandry, green iguanas may reach longevity of 15 to 25 years or more. Unfortunately, they see high mortality due to improper care, housing, and overall setups and environmental conditions.

Distribution and Habitat

The green iguana is a large species of arboreal to semi-arboreal iguana that is very widely distributed over much of Central and South America, from Sinaloa and Veracruz, Mexico, south through the Tropic of Capricorn in Paraguay, and into southeastern Brazil. They also inhabit many islands within the Bahamas and Caribbean, as well as the coastal Pacific, and have also been widely introduced into many other areas, including Hawaii, Rio Grande Valley region of Texas, and Florida of the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. and British Virgin Islands. Other countries of origin within this broad range also include the Dominican Republic, Bolivia, Trinidad, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana. Within their broad range, green iguanas occupy the tropical to sub-tropical rainforests, woodlands, and other forests, where they thermoregulate and forage in the low canopy. Green iguanas are also capable swimmers, and can also often occupy forested areas near riverways and riverbanks, canals, coastal and brackish water areas, swamplands, and agricultural and residential or suburban areas.

Origin/History

Iguana iguana (Linnaeus, 1758). The green iguana (*Iguana iguana*) has arguably been among the most widely traded pet reptile species globally, with millions of individuals having been farmed and exported annually for the domestic and international pet markets. While the exact timeline of when green iguanas were first imported and kept as pets in the U.S. is not known, these large green lizards have been a part of the international pet trade for many decades, since as far back as at least the 1960's and 1970's. During the 1980's and 1990's, hatchling green iguanas became a widespread pet store staple, appealing to many as small 8 to 10 inch brightly colored green lizards, but were largely unsuitable as beginning pet species for many that would purchase them due to their large adult sizes, and large and difficult housing and care requirements.

The green iguana has also become a well known established non-native species in the state of Florida, where they were first reported in Florida in about 1964 (or during the 1960s) in Hialeah,

Coral Gables and Key Biscayne along Miami-Dade County's southeastern coast. Since then, they have expanded their range substantially in Florida, but were, and are not cold tolerant species, resulting in widely generated media reports every year of frozen iguanas falling from trees in Florida!

While the green iguana has been a challenging species in the pet trade, with true captive breeding having been scarce in favor of more inexpensive farmed or imported specimens, some higher end color forms have also been bred in captivity including albino/amelanistic, "blue" or axanthic, and "red" phase green iguanas.

Experience Level Required

Intermediate/Moderate to Advanced.

Size

Hatchling green iguanas begin at approximately 12.0 to 18.0 inches in total snout-to-tail length, or about 3.1 inches in snout-to-vent (SVL) length. Most adult green iguanas range from approximately 3.9 to 6.6 feet, or 46.8 to 79.2 inches in total snout-to-tail length. Average snout-to-vent (SVL) length ranges from about 12.0 to 17.0 inches, with a maximum of 22.8 inches.



Ideal Indoors Green Iguana Enclosures/Setups.

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Semi-Arboreal to Arboreal. Housing must be sealed and escape proof. Younger or smaller iguanas 18" or less can be maintained in a minimum of a three foot by two foot by two foot enclosure, but will outgrow these accommodations and require accordingly larger housing. Larger iguanas should be housed in a minimum of a six foot enclosure by at least three feet by about six feet. Custom designed enclosures are available as well, and are perhaps

the best choices for maintaining most large iguanas species in. Acceptable substrates for green iguanas can include coconut fibers, orchid bark, or chemical and pesticide free topsoil or potting soil. Green iguanas are arboreal lizards, and will climb when provided the opportunity. They require sufficient enclosure height with ample basking, and climbing spaces including sturdy branches, shelves, and other perches. Humidity levels should also be kept at moderate levels with this species at around 60 to 80%. Younger iguanas may require additional retreats such as hide boxes, log or rock hides, or artificial foliage to feel secure. A sturdy, easily cleaned and disinfected food, water, and litter dish should all also be provided as well. Many iguanas can even become litter trained with some time and patience. Although adult green iguanas derive most of their hydration from their foods, also be sure to provide a supplemental water periodically as well in the form of a large water dish or pan. For added hydration and humidity, these iguanas can also be misted and/or soaked in lukewarm water for at least 15 to 20 minutes weekly as well.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

For basking, create a thermal gradient (or a warm side) in the cage/enclosure. Ideal ambient temperatures would be mid 80's degrees F, with a basking temperature of about 120 degrees F. Providing the correct amounts of UVA/UVB overhead incandescent and florescent lighting, and calcium-to-phosphorus ratios is essential for ensuring the health and overall well-being of green iguanas in captivity. Provide at least a 10 to 12 hour day/night cycle. Without UVA/UVB, or adequate amounts of it, they can be susceptible to the abnormal bone growth and development known as Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD), and other health and development maladies. Also be sure to spot clean the enclosure for urates, feces, or uneaten food at least twice per week. Be sure to periodically replace the substrate, clean, and disinfect the enclosure and its furnishings at minimum every 2 to 3 months. Do not allow your iguana to come into contact with any heating element. More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well. ***More detailed housing and enclosure recommendations for green iguanas and other large lizards that are beyond the scope of this care sheet can and should be researched further by any prospective pet owner. Green iguanas should also be maintained at at least 70 to 85% humidity, with some opportunities for humidity to reach 90%.***

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Primarily Herbivorous; In the wild, green iguanas are primarily herbivorous, feeding on a variety of plant materials including leafy greens, flowers, fruits, vegetable matter, and occasionally insects or other invertebrates. Green iguanas have a large variety of dietary requirements that should be met if kept in captivity. Many commercialized iguana diets are available, and can be used. Chopped, store bought fruits and vegetables are also typically relished by green iguanas, and can include mustard greens, collard and turnip greens, green beans, kale, squash, sweet potatoes, carrots, as well as many other choices. Pesticide, or chemical free dandelions and other select weeds can also be given. Absolutely avoid diets high in protein, as such diets can and do lead to gout, renal disease, and other disorders seen in iguanas. Calcium and vitamin D3 supplements are also recommended as part of a healthy green iguana diet. Feeding frequency depends on age, size, and overall health of the animal, but typically should be at minimum every other day. Without the proper diet and amounts of nutrients and supplementation, all iguana species can be very susceptible to Metabolic Bone Disease (or MBD), a debilitating bone and growth disorder, other health and nutritional maladies, or even death in extremely severe cases. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Handling

Green iguanas are animals that require gentle, deliberate, and regular handling in order to become accustomed to being handled. As hatchlings, green iguanas are typically not aggressive, but can be somewhat delicate and skittish initially, and should be handled carefully to prevent injury. Larger and older iguanas can be safely handled using a variety of techniques that adequately support the animal's weight distribution and/or that restrain movements if needed or depending on the disposition of the animal to be handled. A captive born and raised green iguana can become a very docile and personable adult animal to maintain. However, other specimens, such as male iguanas can become aggressive and territorial and require much more careful and experienced handling. This is especially once they reach sexual maturity by around 2 or 3 years old, in which they can be much more challenging to handle and work with. ***More detailed handling techniques for green iguanas and other large lizards that are beyond the scope of this care sheet can and should be researched further.***

****Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens****

Contact

Authored by Eric Roscoe. For any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns regarding this animal, group of animals, or this care sheet, please email and contact:

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Additional Green Iguana Resources

Green Iguana Society

<http://www.greenigsociety.org/careinfo.htm>

Pet IguanaCare.org

<http://petiguanacare.org/>

IguanaResource

<http://www.iguanaresource.org/whatdoiguanaseat.html>

Disclaimer: Note that the information provided in these, or any care sheets, are not intended to be all-exhaustive, and further research and care should always be sought and provided when it comes to any species one may prospectively be interested in. These care sheets are also not intended to serve as substitutes for professional veterinary medical care and husbandry should any animal require it. Always seek proper and professional veterinary care for any animal should the need arise, and be prepared ahead of time for any and all husbandry costs and expenses that may occur with any animal beyond the initial purchase. Any animal owned is ultimately a matter of personal/individual care and responsibility. We cannot make any claims or guarantees regarding any information in this care sheet therein. This care sheet may be reprinted or redistributed only in its entirety.

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