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African Side-Necked Turtle Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

African side-necked turtles (*Pelomedusa* and *Pelusios* spp.) are semi-aquatic freshwater turtles from sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar. They get their name from their unique habit of folding their long neck sideways under the shell instead of retracting straight back. Adults typically grow to **7–12 inches** long and can live **20–50+ years** in captivity with proper care. They're hardy, curious, and often interactive, making them popular pets for prepared keepers.

## **Housing & Environment**

African side-necks are **fully aquatic turtles** that still need access to a dry basking area. A single adult generally needs **at least a 75–100 gallon aquarium**, with a **minimum 10 gallons per inch of shell** as a rule of thumb. The water should be deep enough to allow free swimming (ideally 12–18 inches or more) but include sloped or stepped areas for resting closer to the surface.

A stable, large basking platform is critical—even though they’re shy baskers, they need a fully dry area to avoid shell problems. Use a strong filter rated for **at least twice** the tank volume to manage waste. Substrate can be bare-bottom (for easy cleaning) or fine sand; avoid gravel that can be ingested.

**Habitat Summary:**

* **Tank size:** ≥75 gallons for adults
* **Water depth:** ≥12–18 inches, sloped resting areas
* **Basking platform:** Sturdy, dry, easy-access
* **Substrate:** Bare-bottom or fine sand
* **Filtration:** Strong external/canister filter rated ≥2× tank volume
* **Décor:** Driftwood, large rocks, artificial or live plants (secured)
* **Cleaning:** Spot clean daily; partial water changes weekly

## **Temperature, Lighting & UVB**

Side-necked turtles are tropical species requiring **warm water and air**. Use a submersible aquarium heater to maintain **water temperature at 78–82°F**. The basking platform should be kept at **88–95°F** using an overhead heat lamp.

Provide **12 hours of UVB lighting daily**. UVB is essential for healthy shell and bone development, helping them metabolize dietary calcium. Bulbs should be replaced every 6–12 months, even if they still produce visible light.

**Temperature & Lighting Guidelines:**

* **Water temp:** 78–82°F
* **Basking zone:** 88–95°F
* **UVB lighting:** 10–12%, 12 hrs/day
* **Heating equipment:** Submersible heater, ceramic or incandescent basking lamp
* **Lighting cycle:** 12 hours on / 12 hours off

## **Water Quality & Maintenance**

Good water quality is critical for health. African side-necks produce significant waste. Invest in an over-sized filter (canister recommended) and perform **weekly partial water changes (25–50%)**. Use dechlorinated or conditioned water to prevent irritation and avoid chlorine toxicity.

Regular testing for ammonia, nitrites, and nitrates helps avoid disease. Uneaten food should be removed promptly to prevent fouling.

**Water Care Tips:**

* **Filtration:** Heavy-duty, sized >2× tank volume
* **Water changes:** 25–50% weekly
* **Source:** Dechlorinated tap or well water
* **Monitoring:** Test water parameters monthly
* **Daily:** Remove uneaten food/debris

## **Diet & Nutrition**

African side-necked turtles are **opportunistic omnivores**. In captivity, they do well on a balanced diet of commercial aquatic turtle pellets, supplemented with animal protein and occasional plant matter.

Feed hatchlings daily, juveniles every day or every other day, and adults every **2–3 days**. Protein sources can include earthworms, crickets, thawed frozen fish (low-fat species), shrimp, and commercial diets. Offer dark leafy greens and aquatic plants to encourage natural foraging behavior.

**Feeding Guidelines:**

* **Staple:** High-quality aquatic turtle pellets (e.g., Mazuri, Zoo Med)
* **Protein:** Worms, insects, fish (avoid fatty fish)
* **Vegetables:** Romaine, collard, dandelion greens, duckweed
* **Fruits:** Very limited—occasional treat
* **Supplements:** Calcium with D3 2–3× weekly, multivitamin weekly
* **Feeding method:** Separate container feeding recommended to reduce tank fouling

## **Healthcare & Veterinary Care**

African side-necks benefit from an **initial veterinary exam** and **annual checkups**. Common health issues include **respiratory infections** (from inadequate heat or humidity), **shell rot** (from poor basking provision or dirty water), **metabolic bone disease** (from UVB deficiency), and **parasites**.

Look for signs of illness such as wheezing, nasal discharge, lethargy, shell softness, loss of appetite, or buoyancy issues. Any sick turtle should be evaluated promptly. Always wash hands after contact to reduce risk of Salmonella exposure.

**Healthcare Notes:**

* **Exams:** Initial + annual
* **Watch for:** Wheezing, nasal discharge, shell lesions, lethargy
* **Common issues:** Respiratory infection, shell rot, MBD, parasites
* **Prevention:** Clean water, proper heat, UVB exposure

## **Behavior & Handling**

African side-necks are generally **shy and cautious**, preferring observation over frequent handling. They may become bold over time, recognizing their keepers at feeding time. Handle minimally to reduce stress. When necessary, **support their body fully** with both hands.

They have long necks and may **snap defensively** if threatened—handle carefully and avoid sudden movements.

**Behavior Tips:**

* **Personality:** Cautious but can become interactive
* **Handling:** Minimal; support body fully
* **Signs of stress:** Retreating, neck extension, snapping
* **Interaction:** Best appreciated visually

## **Enrichment & Habitat Design**

To encourage natural behaviors, provide a **complex aquatic environment** with driftwood, plants, and hiding areas. Smooth rocks or submerged branches allow resting close to the surface. Rotate décor every few months to maintain interest.

A large, secure basking area is essential, even if they use it infrequently—it prevents shell infections by allowing them to fully dry.

**Enrichment Ideas:**

* Driftwood and submerged logs
* Artificial or live aquatic plants
* Rock ledges for climbing/resting
* Floating basking docks
* Rotating décor to encourage exploration

## **Fun Facts & FAQs**

* Named for their unique **side-folding neck**—they can’t retract straight back like many turtles.
* Found across sub-Saharan Africa, often in seasonal ponds and rivers.
* Can live **20–50+ years** with good care.
* Require **warm, tropical conditions** year-round—no brumation needed nor recommended.
* Often become **responsive to feeding routines**, watching keepers approach.

### **Supplies Checklist**

* Aquarium (≥75–100 gallons for adult)
* Heavy-duty canister or external filter
* Submersible heater, basking lamp with UVB bulb
* Thermometer for water and basking zone
* Basking platform (fully dry, stable)
* Driftwood, rocks, plants (secured)
* High-quality turtle pellets, live/frozen protein items
* Fresh greens and calcium-rich vegetables
* Calcium with D3 and reptile multivitamin supplements
* Water conditioner and test kit
* Secure carrier for veterinary visits

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