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Chinese Water Dragon Care Sheet

## **Species Overview**

The **Chinese Water Dragon (*Physignathus cocincinus*)** is an attractive, semi-arboreal lizard native to the lush forests of Southeast Asia. Known for their vivid green coloration, muscular bodies, long tails, and prominent crests in adult males, these lizards are strong swimmers that often dive into water to escape predators.

Water dragons are intelligent, curious, and active reptiles that can become moderately tame with gentle, consistent interaction. However, they are **not low-maintenance pets**. They require **large enclosures, high humidity, and careful temperature management** to stay healthy. With good care, they can live **10–15 years** in captivity.

## **Housing & Environment**

Chinese Water Dragons are **semi-arboreal** and **semi-aquatic**, needing **tall, spacious, well-ventilated enclosures** that allow climbing, basking, and access to water for soaking or swimming.

**Minimum recommended size for adults:**

* **6 feet long × 3 feet wide × 4–6 feet tall** (bigger is better)

A typical glass terrarium is too small for adults. Many keepers use custom-built enclosures to meet these requirements.

**Essential features:**

* Vertical space with **strong climbing branches, vines, and shelves**
* Multiple secure hides and shaded areas
* Dense live or artificial plants for cover
* Large water basin or pool for soaking and swimming
* Escape-proof design with excellent ventilation

**Substrate:**

* Coconut husk, cypress mulch, or organic soil blends to maintain humidity
* Spot-clean daily; replace or disinfect substrate every 4–8 weeks

**Cleaning:**

* Remove waste promptly
* Disinfect water features weekly or more often if soiled
* Clean décor regularly to prevent mold and bacteria buildup

## **Heating, Lighting & Humidity**

Water dragons rely on precise **heat gradients, UVB exposure, and humidity** to stay healthy.

**Temperature gradient:**

* **Basking spot:** 90–95°F
* **Ambient daytime:** 80–88°F
* **Cooler shaded areas:** 75–80°F
* **Nighttime:** 70–75°F

**Heating:**

* Overhead halogen or incandescent basking bulbs, controlled with dimmers or thermostats
* Ceramic heat emitters if nighttime heat is needed
* Avoid heat rocks, which can cause burns

**UVB Lighting:**

* **Essential** to prevent metabolic bone disease
* Use **high-output T5 HO 10–12% UVB tubes** covering at least half of the enclosure length
* Replace bulbs every 6–12 months

**Humidity:**

* Maintain **60–80%** average
* Achieve with **multiple daily mistings, live plants, large water features, and foggers if needed**
* Allow for natural humidity fluctuations (higher after misting)
* Digital hygrometers recommended for accuracy

## **Water & Hydration**

Chinese Water Dragons are **semi-aquatic** and need consistent access to clean water.

**Water feature requirements:**

* Large basin or pool deep enough for full-body soaking
* Easy access in and out to prevent drowning
* Daily water changes for hygiene
* Weekly disinfecting with reptile-safe products

They often **defecate in water**, making diligent cleaning essential to prevent bacterial infections.

**Hydration tips:**

* Mist the enclosure 2–3 times daily to provide droplets for drinking
* Provide broad leaves and décor for water collection

## **Diet & Nutrition**

Chinese Water Dragons are **opportunistic omnivores** that do best on an **insect-heavy diet** with limited plant matter and occasional vertebrate prey.

**Primary diet:**

* Live insects (crickets, dubia roaches, black soldier fly larvae, silkworms, hornworms)
* Gut-load insects for 24–48 hours before feeding

**Occasional treats:**

* Pinky mice (adults only, sparingly)
* Small amounts of leafy greens (collard, mustard, dandelion)
* Limited fruit (berries, melon, mango)

**Feeding schedule:**

* Juveniles: **Daily** feedings
* Adults: **Every other day**

**Supplementation:**

* Calcium without D3: Most feedings
* Calcium with D3: 1–2× weekly
* Multivitamin: 1× weekly

**Feeding tips:**

* Use feeding tongs to reduce risk of biting fingers
* Remove uneaten insects to prevent stress or injury

## **Behavior & Handling**

Water Dragons are **active, intelligent, and highly visual**, but they can be shy and skittish. With gentle, patient interaction they may tolerate handling, but many remain wary.

**Handling guidelines:**

* Approach calmly from the side or below
* Support the entire body, including the long tail
* Keep handling sessions short and positive
* Watch for stress signs like gaping, tail-whipping, or diving into water

Excessive handling can lead to **chronic stress, injury, or illness**.

## **Healthcare & Veterinary Care**

Plan for an **initial veterinary exam** after acquisition and **annual wellness visits** with an experienced reptile vet.

**Common health issues:**

* Metabolic bone disease (from inadequate UVB or calcium)
* Respiratory infections (linked to poor temps or humidity)
* Mouth rot (infectious stomatitis)
* Skin infections from injuries or poor hygiene
* Parasites (internal and external)
* Tail or limb injuries from enclosure falls

**Warning signs:**

* Lethargy or weakness
* Loss of appetite or weight loss
* Wheezing or mouth breathing
* Swollen jaw or mouth discharge
* Retained shed or skin infections

Early veterinary care is crucial for preventing progression of illness.

## **Enrichment & Habitat Design**

A **naturalistic, dynamic enclosure** promotes physical and mental health.

**Enrichment strategies:**

* Climbing branches, vines, and ledges at different heights
* Dense foliage for security and exploration
* Large water area for swimming and soaking
* Rotating décor to encourage exploration
* Timed lighting and misting to simulate day/night cycles and rain events

This enrichment reduces stress, encourages **natural behaviors**, and improves overall well-being.

## **Facts & FAQs**

* Excellent **swimmers and climbers** that use water to escape predators.
* Can **change shades** of green and brown depending on mood, temperature, and health.
* Males develop prominent **nuchal and dorsal crests** as they mature.
* Native to **Southeast Asia’s tropical forests** with high humidity and dense canopy.
* Lifespan of **10–15 years** in captivity with proper care.

### **Supplies & Care Checklist**

* Large, secure enclosure (≥6×3×4–6 ft recommended)
* Climbing branches, vines, shelves
* Dense live or artificial plants for cover
* Large water basin or pool
* Halogen/incandescent basking bulbs with thermostat/dimmer
* T5 HO UVB bulb and fixture
* Digital thermometers and hygrometer
* Misting system or spray bottle
* Calcium with and without D3, reptile multivitamin
* Gut-loaded feeder insects
* Feeding tongs, cleaning supplies
* Secure carrier for veterinary visits

*Yarmouth Veterinary Center*