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Owning Leopard Tortoises: A Personal Journey and Considerations for Responsible Pet Ownership



By Noor Azli Affendy Lee

At the tail end of 2020, I wanted to have additional new exotic pets at home. At that time, I had Maine Coon cats, Bengal cats and fennec foxes and was thinking of getting a pair of land tortoises. There are a few important criteria that I look into when I want to own a land tortoise: shell pattern, price, and how big it can grow. There are many land tortoises that have beautiful-looking shells, among them are the radiated tortoise, the Indian star tortoise, the Hermann's tortoise, and the leopard tortoise. When it comes to pricing, the leopard tortoise is the cheapest and easily available as compared to the aforementioned ones. Even though there is another land tortoise known as the African spurred tortoise or the sulcata tortoise that is cheaper and widely available than the leopard tortoise in the Malaysian market, the fact that the former's shell is not as remarkable, and the size differences between the two made me choose the latter. The sulcata tortoise is the third largest species



of tortoise in the world and can grow up to 120 kg with a carapace length of around 86.0 cm and a lifespan of 50 to 100 years. A tortoise that big needs a lot of space! In comparison, following it, the leopard tortoise, which is the fourth largest, has a carapace that can reach out to 70 cm in length and can weigh up to 55 kg (Tetrapod Zoology, 2022).



Before getting the leopard tortoises, I did some research in order to check their compatibility with my lifestyle and prepare myself on what to consider when owning them. Inhabiting Central and Southern Africa, including Ethiopia and Somalia, the leopard tortoise (scientific name: *Stigmochelys pardalis*) a large reptile known for its distinctive high-domed carapace. This tortoise gets their name from the markings on the shell that resemble the wild leopard (McLeod, 2023), which are thick and vary from yellow to black in colour (Bates, 2024). Each unique design varies from tortoise to tortoise. This species' size and unique appearance have made it a notable subject of interest in both the wild and pet trade industry (Tetrapod Zoology, 2022).

Like other tortoises, leopard tortoises are slow, relatively docile, and not aggressive, especially in captivity (McLeod, 2023). However, unlike some other tortoise species, leopard tortoises are not known to be climbers and do not burrow all that much. Also, they are not known for biting people as compared to other tortoises. They do not fancy frequently handling, and if threatened, they will likely retreat into their shells for defence.





I bought a big fish tank (the one for keeping Koi fish) in order to accommodate a pair of leopard tortoises, which I bought from a breeder in Selangor. I named them Bolt and Lightning. When they arrived, they were only the size of half of my palm. One year later, they had already grown to the size of my full palm, so I let them roam in the back area of my house.

Leopard tortoises need a large living space, protection from cool temperatures, and a varied, nutritious diet (McLeod, 2023). They are herbivorous grazers that feed throughout the day. Their diet in captivity should be high in fibre, with minimal amounts of oxalate-rich greens like beet greens, Swiss chard, and spinach, which can bind calcium and make it unavailable to the tortoises (McLeod, 2023). I provided timothy and alfalfa hays for my leopard tortoises to graze as these are examples of high-fibre grasses. In captivity, their daily diet should consist primarily of grasses, weeds and dark leafy greens (McLeod, 2023). I regularly fed them a variety of vegetables such as bak choy, okra, cucumber, water spinach, kale and collard greens. In addition, I also gave them a variety of fruits like papaya and berries occasionally.



In the wild savannah and grasslands, leopard tortoises eat a variety of vegetation including succulents, thistles, prickly pear, fallen fruit, and fungi. (Tetrapod Zoology, 2022). They thrive in various habitats but are particularly dependent on short grasses. Like all land tortoises, they will also gnaw at bones and even eat mammal faeces. Bolt and Lightning love eating hibiscus flowers but I feed them sparingly. I also allow them to chew on cuttlebone pieces, available in the bird section of most pet stores, to supplement their calcium intake.

In cool weather, wild leopard tortoises sit still in hollows beneath vegetation or in sediment or rock crevices, sometimes for weeks (Tetrapod Zoology, 2022). For my two tortoises, I placed several cardboard boxes for them to hide and sleep in, but sometimes they like to burrow under the stack of hay for warmth. Two big bowls of clean water were readily available for them throughout the day and I bathed them once or twice a week to ensure they were clean and healthy.

Leopard tortoises are listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) due to their exploitation for meat and the pet trade (Tetrapod Zoology, 2022). While they are still relatively abundant in the wild, conservation measures are necessary to ensure their continued survival. In Malaysia, even though the species (*Stigmochelys*) and genus (*pardalis*) are not mentioned under the Testudinidae (tortoise) family in the Wildlife Conservation (Amendment of Schedule) Order 2012 (PERHILITAN, 2012), the leopard tortoise is among the protected species under the Wildlife Conservation Act.



Ownership of these animals requires a special ownership license from the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (PERHILITAN). Further information on how to apply for the license and exotic animal husbandry guide from PERHILITAN can be read from the Garis Panduan Pemeliharaan Hidupan Liar (refer to Reference). Recent enforcement actions have highlighted the importance of adhering to these regulations. For instance, a retiree in Petaling Jaya faced charges for keeping protected wildlife, including Leopard tortoises, without the necessary licenses, potentially facing a significant fine of RM50,000 and imprisonment (Lai, 2023).

Illegal wildlife trade remains a significant threat to Leopard tortoises and other species. In a recent case, Malaysian authorities arrested six members of the "Ninja Turtle Gang," an international crime ring involved in smuggling various reptiles, including Leopard tortoises, into Malaysia (Malay Mail, 2024). The raid resulted in the rescue of approximately 200 smuggled tortoises and turtles, valued at RM246,394. The animals were being smuggled for the lucrative pet market in Southeast Asia. This case underscores the ongoing challenges in wildlife conservation and the illegal pet trade.



Owning Leopard tortoises, like Bolt and Lightning, has been a rewarding experience, filled with learning and joy. These majestic reptiles, with their unique shell patterns and gentle nature, have become cherished members of my household. However, owning such exotic pets comes with significant responsibilities. Proper care, ample space, and a nutritious diet are essential to their well-being. Additionally, it is crucial to adhere to legal requirements and conservation efforts to protect these creatures in the wild. Leopard tortoises, while fascinating pets, are also an important part of our natural world, deserving of respect and preservation for future generations.

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