MEET THEM AT PLUMPTON PARK ZOO

SULCATA TORTOISE

Centrochelys sulcata · also called African spurred tortoise

Teacher & Student Fact Sheet · © **2026 Plumpton Park Zoological Gardens Inc.**
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Fast facts

ANIMAL GROUP	Reptile: tortoise
NATIVE REGION	The Sahel, south of the Sahara
HABITAT	Dry grassland, savanna and scrub
DIET	Herbivore: succulents, herbs and grasses
SHELL LENGTH	Males up to about 31 in; females up to about 23 in
WEIGHT	Usually about 100–200 lb; big males top 220 lb
LIFESPAN	Usually 50–80 years in human care, possibly up to 120
STATUS	Endangered (IUCN Red List)
OUR TORTOISES	Tank and Baby



Photo: Plumpton Park Zoo

Did you know?

- It is the largest tortoise native to mainland Africa.
- Its burrows can stretch up to about 50 feet long.
- A single burrow is sometimes shared by more than one tortoise.
- A sulcata can cool off by spreading saliva on its forearms.
- Females lay about 15–20 eggs, and hatchlings walk and feed on their own from the start.

Words to know

Burrow: a tunnel or hole dug in the ground for shelter.
Ectothermic: getting body heat from the surroundings.
Aestivation: resting through extreme heat or drought.
Sahel: a dry grassland belt south of the Sahara.

Think about it

1. Why is it also called the African spurred tortoise?
2. How does a burrow help a sulcata survive heat and dryness?
3. Can a tortoise leave its shell? Why or why not?
4. Where does a sulcata get much of its water?
5. How many eggs are in a typical clutch, and how many years does a sulcata take to grow up?

Draw it

Draw a sulcata tortoise digging a burrow. Label the shell, spurs, claws and burrow.

STANDARDS · GRADES 3–4 **WRITTEN FOR GRADES 3–5**

Maryland and Delaware (NGSS): **4-LS1-1 · 3-LS4-3 · 3-LS1-1**
Pennsylvania (STEELS): **3.1.4.A · 3.1.3.G · 3.1.3.A**

Draw here

Where it lives in the wild



Lives in the wild ★ Plumpton Park Zoo, Rising Sun, MD

Learn more: https://plumptonparkzoo.org/reptiles-and-amphibians/sulcata-tortoise/ · **Sources:** IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group (Petrozzi et al. 2020); IUCN Red List (2021); CITES Species+; Animal Diversity Web
Supports Maryland and Delaware (NGSS) and Pennsylvania (STEELS) standards: 4-LS1-1 (3.1.4.A) · 3-LS4-3 (3.1.3.G) · 3-LS1-1 (3.1.3.A)
Plumpton Park Zoo · 1416 Telegraph Rd, Rising Sun, MD 21911 · (410) 658-6850 · plumptonparkzoo.org · a 501(c)(3) nonprofit zoo

SULCATA TORTOISE

Before and after your visit

Page 2 of the Sulcata tortoise fact sheet · © 2026 Plumpton Park Zoological Gardens Inc.
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Before you visit · 5 minutes

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Predict: where in the wild does the sulcata tortoise live?
Circle one (or more if it lives on more than one):

Africa | Asia | Australia | Europe | North America | South America

2. Predict: what does it eat?
☐ plants ☐ other animals ☐ both

3. Word hunt: find these words on page 1. Put a check by each one you already know.
☐ Burrow ☐ Ectothermic ☐ Aestivation ☐ Sahel

Pick one word and write what it means in your own words:

_____

_____

4. My question: one thing I want to find out when I see the sulcata tortoise.

_____

_____

At the zoo · look closely

Watch for one minute. What is it doing?
☐ resting ☐ eating ☐ moving ☐ watching
☐ with others

Draw or describe one body part that helps it survive, and say how it helps.

Draw here

After your visit · talk it over

1. Check your prediction. Native region: The Sahel, south of the Sahara. Was your guess right?
☐ yes ☐ no ☐ partly

2. Diet check. The fact sheet says: Herbivore: succulents, herbs and grasses. What did you learn about how it finds or eats food?

_____

_____

3. Discuss with a partner, then write your best answer.

- How does a burrow help a sulcata survive heat and dryness?

_____

- Can a tortoise leave its shell? Why or why not?

_____

4. Exit ticket.

One thing I learned: _____

One thing I still wonder: _____

ADJUST IT
Grades K–2: talk and draw instead of writing; read the questions aloud. **Grades 6–8:** add evidence from the fact sheet and the animal page to every answer.