

# RSPCA Vet Advice on Terrapin Legal and Euthanasia Issues.

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Red-eared, yellow-bellied and Cumberland terrapins (*Trachemys scripta* species) are listed as Invasive Alien Species by a law which came into force in 2019. This means that there are strict restrictions on where they can be held in captivity, and a licence or permit is needed to hold them for longer than 6 weeks. Any rescue centre offering a permanent home for these terrapins, for more than 6 weeks, must be licensed by APHA. Some facilities such as zoos and educational establishments may also be granted a permit to keep terrapins for conservation or research.

Where terrapins have been found in the wild, the [government advice](#) is that they should be left alone if they appear healthy. If they are sick or injured, they can be taken for vet treatment - but they cannot be returned to the wild, or rehomed to the public. Instead, the law then requires them to be taken to a facility with a permit or licence to keep them permanently. Only a small number of establishments have been granted these licences to keep terrapins permanently, and the centres that the RSPCA works with have informed us that they are now at capacity and unable to accept any more terrapins. Where spaces arise, which occasionally happens, these need to be reserved in case we take in case animals that have not been signed over where we are not yet able to euthanase them because the owner has not consented or an 18:3 has not been used.

While the law allows for terrapins to be reunited with their owners if they are found stray, we have to recognise that the vast majority of these animals have been deliberately abandoned. If there are no nearby (within 30 miles/one hour's drive) facilities that can keep terrapins for the standard 7 day hold, and where they have been found in a rural (as opposed to urban or suburban area), then they should be euthanased as it is extremely likely they have been abandoned and no owner will come forwards.

Sadly, this means the RSPCA now has no licensed establishments to take these animals to and the only way for us to comply with the law is to euthanase terrapins in our care. We are aware that this is a frustrating and distressing situation, and that no vet wants to put a healthy animal to sleep, but it is very important that we act in a lawful way. We are exploring different options in relation to how we manage terrapins in the future. Where animals have been signed over they are now the property of the RSPCA and euthanasia should not be delayed.

We are aware that some vets may not have experience in the euthanasia of these species, the following advice is available and may be helpful in these situations

1. AVMA Guidelines on Euthanasia. Guidance for Chelonia (p92).  
<https://www.avma.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Guidelines-on-Euthanasia-2020.pdf>  
Advises pentobarbitone at 60-100mg/kg. The recommended routes are IV, intracoelomic, subcutaneous lymph spaces or lymph sacs.  
Confirming death is difficult in reptiles as they're tolerant of hypoxia, so pentobarbitone should be followed by decapitation and pithing
2. BSAVA Manual of Reptiles, 3rd edition (BSAVA British Small Animal Veterinary Association. S. J. Girling & P Raiti. 2019. Recommends intravenous or intraperitoneal pentobarbitone, followed by pithing
3. Advice from the British Chelonia Group  
<http://www.britishcheloniagroup.org.uk/vetscorner/euthanasia> advises the same as BSAVA

This guidance is intended as advice only and it is the responsibility of the individual veterinary surgeon to decide on a clinical approach that they are comfortable with.

RSPCA Wildlife and Veterinary Departments.

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This advice sheet is intended to provide general guidance only.