



Balloon Releases Threaten Wildlife

Thousands of balloons released into the sky can make an impressive sight but what goes up must come down. The impact of balloons on animals and the environment can be grave – often even fatal.

The threat to wildlife and other animals

Deflated balloons or balloon fragments can look very attractive as food to many different animals and any fragments left on the ground or floating in water can easily be eaten. Ingesting balloons can cause death by blocking the digestive and/or respiratory tracts, and is likely to be slow. This has been witnessed and documented in marine turtles, dolphins, whales and farm animals.

In 2013, DEFRA produced “**Sky lanterns and helium balloons - an assessment of the impacts to livestock and the environment**” in which they identified the choking of a goat and the fatal choking of a cow due to swallowing balloon fragments.



Many marine species have been found with balloons in their stomachs, probably having mistaken them (as well as plastic bags) for jellyfish, a staple food for many



species. Reports from the US and Canada have confirmed that balloons are regularly ingested by sea turtles; a researcher from the University of Texas for example, studied sea turtles that had been found stranded. Five per cent of these turtles were found to have pieces of balloon and plastic bags in their digestive system.

The “**UK & Eire Marine and Turtle Strandings & Sightings Annual Report 2002**” reports on a green turtle found in UK waters with a large fragment of a balloon in its stomach and plastic in its oesophagus. Cause of death was given as oesophageal and stomach impaction. The “**British Isles and Republic of Ireland Marine Turtle Strandings and Sightings Annual Report 2010**” found, in 32 post-mortems, that 5 of those turtles had evidence of litter ingestion.

The problem is getting worse as recent evidence shows an increase in balloon-related litter. The Marine Conservation Society (MCS) annual “**Beachwatch**” survey in 2011 collected more than 1,359 balloons from UK beaches, over three times as many found in 1996! Following the findings of a conference in 1989 on plastic and other debris found at sea, public concern led to the cancellation of mass releases in many cities and several states in the US and Canada.

An estimated 90-95 per cent of released balloons will rise to an altitude of three kilometres and burst into small fragments. The remaining balloons may float many miles before descending to the ground or sea semi-inflated. The largest-ever balloon release was 1.4 million balloons in the US – of those, it has been reported that 140,000 could have fallen to the land.

Even small-scale releases and balloon races may have a serious effect on the environment and animals – the balloons are often not adequately inflated and the attached strings, ribbons may entangle animals. Many such balloons are also intentionally weighted with tags, further increasing the likelihood of it landing at sea or in the countryside.

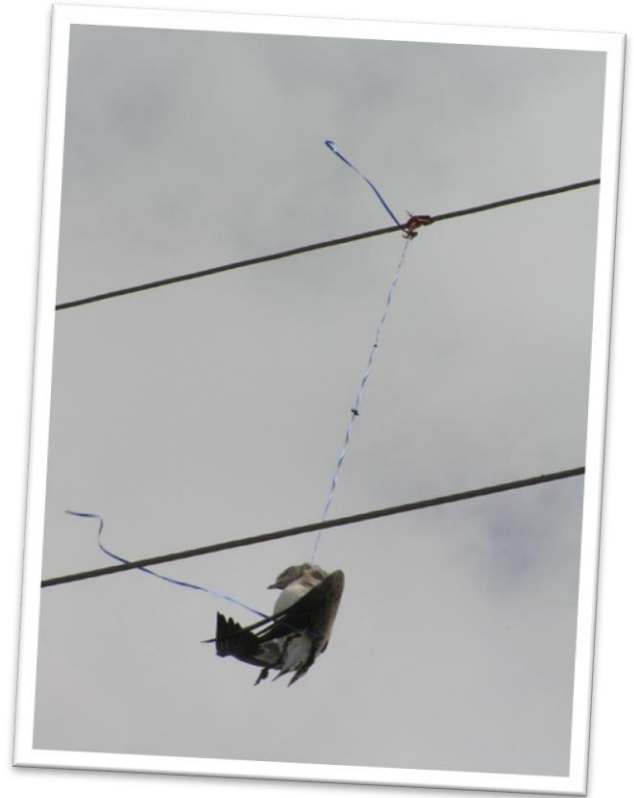
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What is being done?

Multiple animal welfare and conservation groups, including the RSPCA, are calling for a ban on outdoor balloon and sky lantern releases. The MCS run a national campaign “**Don’t Let Go**” aimed at educating the public and pushing councils and Government to make a change.

Opinions are now gradually changing in Britain as people realise the damage balloons can cause. The MCS report a story of a swift that grounded on the Suffolk coast having been entangled in the ribbon of a balloon released in Essex. Luckily the bird was still alive and the charity that had organised the balloon release have agreed to do no more balloon releases, having been shocked that their actions had led to this swift being grounded.

Following recent social media campaigns, the luxury cruise company Cunard, the RNLI and other organisations have cancelled planned balloon releases. Many local authorities, such as Oxford City Council, have now adopted the MCS’s message and are actively discouraging their residents against holding balloon releases.



Are ‘biodegradable’ balloons safe?

Even if the balloons are marked as degradable they may take a number of weeks to ‘degrade’, whereas it could take only seconds for an animal to swallow a balloon or balloon fragment. Research states that latex balloons degrade faster than oak leaves, a fact often used in defence of mass balloon releases. This is misleading however as an oak leaf can take six months or longer to break down. Most of the balloons used in releases are made of this ‘degradable latex’ but many also have foil linings that take even longer to degrade.

Planning a balloon release?

The RSPCA feels that it would be lamentable if money were to be raised for one good cause only to find that it was responsible for the blight of another. Both the marine and terrestrial environments are already heavily polluted and balloon releases can only exacerbate the situation.

THE RSPCA URGES PEOPLE PLANNING BALLOON RELEASES TO RECONSIDER THE FOLLOWING POINTS.

- What goes up must come down – all balloons released will fall back to earth either semi-deflated or in dozens of potentially tiny and hard to retrieve fragments, constituting a real hazard to both animals and their environment, both marine and terrestrial.
- It is estimated that only five per cent of all balloons released will return intact.
- While the known instances of ingestion are relatively few, compared to other known causes of animal mortality, it is likely that these are representative of a greater problem.
- Because we don’t know the true extent of the threat posed by such activities a precautionary approach should be adopted, i.e. **don’t do it**.

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What you can do!

- Don't let go of balloons if you are outside.
- If you find a balloon displaying a company or organisation name, send it back to them with a copy of this factsheet.
- If you hear about a release, write to the organisers, explain the likely consequences and ask them to reconsider urging them to think of an alternative way of celebrating their next event.
- Use latex rather than mylar or foil balloons. Do not attach plastic ribbon, tags or other labels to the balloons.
- If using balloons outside, make sure they are securely tied down. Make sure to use natural cotton string.
- Use air to inflate balloons, rather than helium.
- Always tie balloons by hand, don't use plastic valves.
- Express your concern about the environmental impacts of balloon releases by writing to the National Association of Balloon Artists and Suppliers (NABAS), Katepwa House, Ashfield Park Avenue, Ross-On-Wye HR9 5AX, Tel: 01989 762204.
- Take part in the MCS's annual "Beachwatch" project.

Alternatives

These kinds of alternatives mean that the balloons used can be cut up and disposed of in closed litter-bins following the event, rather than being released into the environment. Positive promotion of these environmentally friendly events could be advantageous to the organisers when raising money and any balloon manufacturers that advocate or promote such an initiative.

- Use the same balloons intended for release to build balloon statues, then sell balloon numbers through a lottery or raffle style competition.
- You could put raffle tickets in a few balloons, blow them up indoors and sell tickets to pop each one, the winners being those who pop a balloon holding a ticket.
- You could also fill something (car, phone box, room etc) up with balloons and sell tickets to guess how many balloons the space contains.
- Some organisations (such as the RSPB) have launched 'virtual balloon races' where each balloon's progress can be tracked on Google Maps. These can be 'launched' for any charitable cause, campaign or for loved ones.



Further information

RSPCA – Litter

<http://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/litter>

The Marine Conservation Society – Don't Let Go

http://www.mcsuk.org/what_we_do/Clean+seas+and+beaches/Campaigns+and+policy/Don't+let+go+-+balloons+and+sky+lanterns

Balloons Blow ... Don't Let Them Go!

<http://balloonsblow.org/>

UK Rivers Network – Balloon Releases: Pollution Factsheet

http://www.ukrivers.net/balloon_fact.html

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

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