The Environmental Impact of Balloon Releases and Suggestions for Eco-Friendly Alternatives

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A single balloon can travel thousands of miles and end up polluting an aquatic, marine, or terrestrial ecosystem. A bird, fish, or sea turtle could also fatally mistake the resulting balloon debris for food and/or get entangled in the long balloon ribbons or strings. In the case of a mass balloon release, common at weddings, graduations, memorials, and holiday events, hundreds or even thousands of balloons can be released simultaneously, causing great environmental harm.

In 2013, as part of an elementary school project, 300 helium balloons were released from Derby, England. While some of these balloons were discovered in Denmark and The Netherlands, one balloon was found in New South Wales, Australia, 10,545 miles away. Closer to home, in 2017, a single balloon was released as part of a first birthday celebration in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Five days and 430 miles later, that same balloon was discovered in Pine Knob, Kentucky.

Unfortunately, these are not uncommon occurrences. Every day, balloons and balloon ribbons and strings are discovered littering beaches, rivers, lakes, oceans, as well as forests, farmland, and other green spaces. As a direct result, wildlife, livestock, and pets are injured or killed because of balloon debris. The number of balloons found on beaches and coastlines has reportedly tripled over the past decade. In 2017, the Alliance of the Great Lakes reported finding 3,604 balloons on Lake Michigan and 7,196 throughout all of the Great Lakes.

Balloons found along the shore of Lake Michigan. Photo: Loreen Niewenhuis, laketrek.blogspot.com
Marine and aquatic pollution has become an increasing concern worldwide, especially when it comes to plastic. In a 2016 report issued from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and the World Economic Forum, it was stated that if the current rate of plastic pollution continues, there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish by 2050. This prediction has elicited alarm throughout the global community and increased calls for bans on plastic bags, straws, and other single-use items, including mylar, latex, and ‘biodegradable’ balloons, which still take years to break down.

Beyond polluting the environment, marine and aquatic plastic debris can be deadly for wildlife. For example, a new study reported that even a single piece of ingested plastic can be deadly for a sea turtle. Due to their physiology, sea turtles cannot regurgitate, therefore, any ingested plastic can block their digestive tract, leading to starvation and death. This is especially true for floating balloon debris, which sea turtles mistake for jellyfish, a favored prey.

Another scientific report published March 1, 2019, stated that balloons are the single deadliest form of marine plastic for seabirds. This study found that birds that had “swallowed balloon fragments were 32 times more likely to die than birds that had only eaten hard plastics.” Balloon debris also float on or near the surface and can closely resemble jellyfish or squid.

Other marine and aquatic animals, fish, and birds can also be injured or killed as a result of balloon entanglement. According to a 2016 article published in Marine Policy, balloon debris ranks just behind fishing lines and plastic bags, as the greatest risk to marine wildlife. This is due to the fact that balloons are usually tied with long pieces of ribbon or string, which can easily entangle birds and other wildlife.
As public awareness of marine and plastic pollution increases, a growing movement in the United States is calling for more policies and laws to restrict or eliminate single use plastics, including balloons\(^1,6,7\). California, Connecticut, Florida, Tennessee, and Virginia have all passed laws prohibiting the release of balloons as a way to protect the environment and wildlife. Cities like Toledo, Ohio, Provincetown, Massachusetts, Wrightsville, North Carolina, and New Shoreham, Rhode Island have also passed laws prohibiting the release and, in some instances, the sale of balloons within city limits\(^1,7,11,16,21\).

This past year, following an outcry from environmental groups, Clemson University in South Carolina ended the tradition of releasing 10,000 balloons before each football game\(^3\). Lawsuits, including one from the non-profit, Balloons Blow, have also been brought against the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, calling for a stop to the practice of releasing thousands of balloons during home games\(^9,15\). While the University of Michigan does not permit balloon releases during football games or at any other organized outdoor event, there is no official balloon release ban.

**GREEN ALTERNATIVES:**

Balloons are only one small part of the larger issue of plastic pollution, however, actively choosing to use alternatives and raise awareness will make a huge difference. **If you are looking for a way to celebrate or mark a special occasion, there are many green, eco-friendly alternatives to balloons and balloon releases.**

Student groups or other organizations could plant native trees or flowers (in designated areas), fly kites, wave flags or banners, light candles, blow bubbles, create chalk drawings, paint murals, organize a community walk, run, or bike ride, or even do trail or river cleanups\(^1\).

Any of these alternatives would help bring a community or group together to celebrate or commemorate a special occasion without causing harm to the environment or wildlife.

If you choose to organize or participate in an event where balloon alternatives are being used, please help to raise awareness by posting on social media and/or talking with family, friends, or colleagues. Help spread the message that while balloons are out, there are still plenty of fun, environmentally-friendly ways to celebrate.
REFERENCES:


