

Balloons

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What goes up does come down

The mass release of balloons has become a popular tool at promotional events or to celebrate a wedding, birth or memorial.

Balloon releases are becoming more popular at funerals as a visual expression of love for the one who has passed. Releases are normally done at the end of the service to symbolise letting go of the loved one and letting the grieving process begin. As the balloons are slowly drifting upward, I am sure no one gives a thought to what happens to the balloons after they are released.

While these releases continue in many parts of Australia and the rest of the world, considerable information from local and overseas sources continues to support the fact that marine creatures are at risk from swallowing these balloons.

Whether the balloon is attached to a string or not, if it is filled with helium, it will float and, eventually, come down still presenting a choking hazard or digestion hazard for marine turtles and many other species.

The law against the release of balloons differs from state to state. New South Wales is the most hardcore state when it comes to releasing balloons. While other states have considered similar bans, nothing has been set in stone just yet.

Our Society was successful in lobbying the New South Wales Government in 2000 to have the mass release of balloons banned in this state. It is now illegal to release 20 or more gas-inflated balloons at or about the same time. The balloons should not have any attachments. On-the-spot fines can be given, and penalties are much higher if over 100 balloons are released. This ruling comes under the Protection of the Environment Operations Amendment (Balloons) Act 2000. There are some exceptions to the offences, for example where the balloons are released for scientific purposes.

If one were to dump 1,000 balloons on the roadway, the action would

incur a penalty for littering. What gives people the right to dump many thousands of balloons in the ocean? That is very likely where helium-filled balloons will end up.

The so-called grey area on littering with balloons is the fact that if balloons are found, the identity of the person/s releasing such balloons cannot be established. This too is a far cry from a rational argument. Litter is litter, whether it goes up or down, and the organisations or individuals mass-releasing balloons can readily be identified at the point of release. This plastic litter comes down somewhere and, in the case of balloons, presents a threat to all marine wildlife. In brief, mass releases of helium balloons present a serious hazard to marine life, especially endangered sea turtles and seabirds, which mistake these items for food.

Queensland hosts the most prolific populations of nesting sea turtles in Australia. Every species of the six species of turtles in Australian waters is either endangered, threatened or vulnerable.

Our concern now is that the proliferation of plastic in the ocean is so great there is no safe place for sea turtles. In a study conducted by researchers in the United States, some

parts of the ocean have so much plastic that the pieces outnumber plankton five to one.

Latex, which is used in the manufacture of balloons, is biodegradable. However, there are many marine creatures constantly searching for food sources. A floating balloon, or a piece thereof, represents a food source, whether it is biodegradable, deflated, blue, green, orange or in small, so-called harmless pieces... it continues to be a significant threat to our precious wildlife, irrespective of the size, colour, texture or shape of the pollutant.

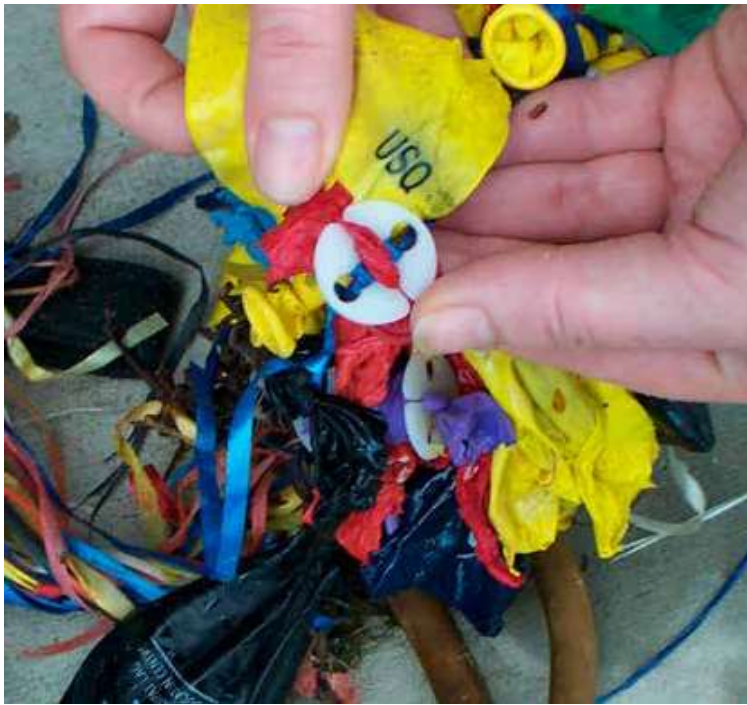
In worldwide studies (US Fisheries and Wildlife; UK Marine Conservation Society) it is estimated that a latex balloon may take as long as twelve months to biodegrade. Meanwhile, as it degrades, thousands more are released into the environment at balloon releases to 'top up' the constant threat to our wildlife.

The jet-stream air flow across the continent is from west to east. Helium balloons are thus likely to reach the height of the jet stream and, eventually, find their way into the ocean.

Have you ever been to a party where helium balloons were floating around



Green sea turtle – named for the green colour of the fat under its shell.



A sample of 40 balloons collected in one hour, on one kilometre of the beach at Angourie, New South Wales.



Balloons littering the coastline.

the room? And for those who stayed late, they would have noticed that these balloons slowly drifted to the floor. There is a simple explanation: helium is an expensive gas. Its atomic structure is very small, in fact, the second smallest atom in the world. A balloon is filled with what is called 'balloon gas' – a mixture of ordinary air and helium – just enough to float the balloon. The helium is small enough, over time, to pass through the wall of the balloon, thus allowing the balloon to descend.

The Beyond Plastic Pollution
– Pathways to Cleaner Oceans
Conference was held in October 2017



Black albatross, dead from entanglement in balloons and string.

with the aim to try to reduce the eight million tonnes of plastic waste entering our oceans each year. This was the first conference of its kind to be held in Australia with the aim to find pathways to cleaner oceans.

Every person involved in the release of helium balloons creates a real threat

to many endangered species of marine creatures. Assisted by the Australian Funeral Directors Association, we are hoping to address the issue of mass helium balloon releases nationally.

What goes up does come down!

We are losing our endangered species.

The Australian Wildlife Society is an all-volunteer registered, not-for-profit conservation organisation holding tax exemption status with the Australian Taxation Office and is listed on the Register of Environmental Organisations.

The Society was formed in Sydney in May 1909 and is totally committed to the preservation and protection of Australia's unique native fauna and flora in all its forms through national environmental education programs, community involvement, political lobbying and advocacy, as well as practical hands-on wildlife conservation projects.

The Society's members are dedicated to preserving Australia's native wildlife for future generations of young Australians.

The Society celebrated a centenary of wildlife conservation in 2009.

Further details can be found on our website – www.aws.org.au