

BALLOON DEBRIS: A RISING CONCERN

A PreventBalloonLitter.org Fact Sheet

Balloons are unique among all the man-made litter and debris found in the ocean and on the land because people purchase helium-filled balloons with the intent of releasing them into the environment. Too many people still participate in balloon releases because they do not make the connection that when balloons go up they come back to Earth as potentially harmful litter.

PREVENT
balloon
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DEADLIEST OCEAN TRASH

TO:

- 1 Fishing gear
- 2 Plastic bags & utensils
- 3 Balloons
- 4 Cigarette butts
- 5 Bottle caps

Ocean Conservancy

While all marine debris has some potential to harm wildlife, balloons have been identified as among the five deadliest types of debris due to the risk they pose to marine wildlife.

Graphic at left - More than 270 experts in marine debris, were asked by the Ocean Conservancy to rank the severity of impacts of marine debris on seabirds, sea turtles and marine mammals. Balloons were ranked number three due to the likelihood of entanglement or ingestion by marine life.

TYPES OF BALLOON LITTER



LATEX BALLOONS

Are made with the sap from a rubber tree. During the manufacturing process many chemicals are added to raw rubber including pigments, oils, curing agents and accelerators. While natural latex balloons are considered biodegradable by some, it has been argued that latex balloons may take several months to several years to biodegrade. According to the study, "Balloon Litter on Virginia's Remote Beaches," 56% of all littered balloons recorded were latex.

FOIL BALLOONS

Often incorrectly referred to as Mylar balloons. "Mylar" is actually a brand name for a special type of polyester film. Foil or metallic balloons are made of plastic (nylon) sheets coated with polyethylene and metallic materials that are sealed together with heat. Experience shows that these metallic inks and paints flake off when exposed to environmental factors leaving a clear plastic balloon. Over time, foil balloons break up into smaller pieces but are not biodegradable.

ATTACHMENTS

Helium-filled balloons often have plastic ribbons and other items attached such as plastic valves, tie-off discs, and clips. It is also common to find plastic ribbons that have become separated from balloons.

BY THE NUMBERS

In 2016-2019, volunteers participating in the International Coastal Cleanup reported more than 29,800 littered balloons in Mid-Atlantic states—New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland and Virginia. Of these, 15,076 balloons were found in New York, 6,626 were found in New Jersey, and Virginia volunteers found 4,154 balloons. Data reveal that in Virginia most of the balloon litter is found on its beaches, demonstrating that balloon litter accumulates in some coastal environments. A 5-year (2013-2017) monitoring project on remote islands of Virginia documented 11,441 pieces of balloon litter—up to 272 pieces per mile of beach.

THE IMPACTS OF BALLOON LITTER



RELEASED BALLOONS TRAVEL GREAT DISTANCES AND IMPACT ANIMALS AND PEOPLE!

Released balloons can drift hundreds, and even thousands of miles, carried first on wind currents and coming back down on land, or falling into the ocean, where they can then be carried by currents hundreds of additional miles.

Latex balloons can burst in the atmosphere [1], so that when they fall into the water they resemble jelly fish, a favorite food of sea turtles.

Many species of marine wildlife, including the endangered Kemp's ridley have been reported to ingest balloons. While one turtle was lucky to be rescued, another died with two latex balloons lodged in its gastrointestinal tract [2 and 3].

The metallic inks and paints on foil balloons flake off when exposed to the environment, leaving a clear plastic balloon. which to a hungry sea turtle can look similar to jellyfish. [4].

Balloon litter can also endanger or kill birds. Most of the osprey chick's nest in image [5] is filled with balloons and ribbons. A Laughing gull entangled in balloon ribbon hangs from a powerline [6]. Even farm animals have ingested balloons and ribbon.

People also are negatively impacted by balloons when foil balloons become entangled in power lines and cause wide-spread power outages [7].

The negative impacts of balloon litter are far reaching!

Image Credits:

1 - Christina Trapani; 2 - Pam Denmon, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Northeast Region; 3 - Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission ; 4 - Christina Trapani ; 5 - Ben Wurst., Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ; 6 - Pam Denmon, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Northeast Region; 7 - Clean Virginia Waterways



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Visit PreventBalloonLitter.org for a complete list of partners committed to help monitor and reduce balloon litter through research, education, clean-ups and/or other programming.

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