

Balloons: What Goes Up Must Come Down

By Celeste Silling

In the minds of many Americans, helium balloons are associated with freedom and lightheartedness. Balloon releases are common parts of parties, openings, and even memorial services. People like to imagine them floating away on the wind high up into the clouds. What they may not think about is what happens afterwards.



What goes up must come down, and the balloons that we release come down as litter. Many of these balloons make it all the way to the ocean before they touch down in a deflated mass. These balloons join the oodles of other ocean pollutants, but they stand out amongst the other garbage for a number of reasons.

Latex balloons take months to completely degrade in the ocean and mylar balloons take about 4 years. In that time, they can do a lot of damage. Sea animals often mistake litter for food, but balloons in particular pose a special threat to turtles. The brightly colored, flowing shapes resemble jellyfish, the favorite food of sea turtles.

When animals eat indigestible litter like balloons, it can cause pain, sickness and even death. Balloons and other litter can become lodged in the digestive tract of any animal who eats them, obstructing the way for air and food to get through. This causes the animal to slowly die of starvation, or in the case of the sea turtle, fill with gas. The trapped air makes the turtle float on the surface of the water like a pool floaty, unable to dive down and find food.

Balloons can be harmful even for animals who don't consume them. Most balloons have strings attached when they are released. Like the balloons themselves, these strings can take months or years to dissolve. The strings might not seem like much of a problem, but to many wildlife conservationists, the strings are enemy number one! Protected shorebirds such as American Oystercatchers and Wilson's Plovers that Gulf Coast Bird Observatory monitors can get tangled in these strings and have no way to get out. The strings can cut off circulation in limbs, causing cuts, infection, loss of limbs, and death. They can also get wrapped around the wings, preventing the bird from flying and hunting until it starves.

Environmental groups have been trying to stop mass balloon releases for years with some success. Some cities have even banned balloon releases entirely. But whether or not your city weighs in on this issue, we can all make our own choices to protect animals.

I haven't blown up or released a balloon in years since I learned all of this and I don't miss it. There are plenty of alternative decorations that do less harm and look just as good! Streamers, banners, pinwheels, and flags have replaced balloons at my parties and no one seems to notice. I save time and money by buying reusable decorations instead of ones that will pop or fly into the sky when the party's over. It's an easy transition to make and it feels good to save animal lives! Why not make the switch yourself?