

Valentine's Day Balloons

By Celeste Silling

Valentine's day is close at hand and love is in the air, but balloons don't have to be! Balloon releases are commonly seen during big romantic gestures, but to those of us who clean up beaches and waterways, those plastic blobs are more infuriating than beautiful. Often, the people who release their balloons like to imagine them floating away on the wind high up into the clouds. What they may not think about is what happens afterwards and where their giant pink heart balloons can end up.

What goes up must come down. The balloons that proclaim our love come down as litter. Many of these balloons make it all the way to the ocean, bay or bayous before they touch down in a deflated mass. These balloons join the other ocean pollutants, but they stand out amongst the other debris for a number of reasons.

Balloons, both plastic and latex, remain intact in the ocean water, floating around near the surface with their long tails behind them. Marine animals often mistake litter for food, but balloons in particular pose a special threat to turtles. The brightly colored, flowing shapes resemble jellyfish, which sea turtles eat.

When animals eat debris like balloons, it can cause them injury, sickness, and even death. Balloons can become lodged in the digestive tract of any animal who eats them, obstructing the passage so that air and food can't get through. This causes the animal to slowly die of starvation. In the case of the sea turtle, the passage fills with gas. This makes the turtle float on the surface of the water so that they are unable to dive down and find food.

But the dangers of lost balloons don't stop there! Most balloons have strings attached when they are released and those strings can easily tangle. Protected shorebirds such as American Oystercatchers or other wildlife like crabs, turtles, and pelicans can get tangled in these strings and have no way to get out. The strings can cut off circulation to limbs, causing cuts, infection, loss of limbs, and death. They can also prevent the animal from moving and hunting, therefore causing starvation.

Due to these and other problems, some cities, like Galveston, have banned balloon releases all together. But our shores are still littered with the remnants of balloons following each major holiday. So whether or not your city bans them, we can all make our own choices to protect animals and their habitats.

The good news is that there are plenty of alternative Valentine's decorations and presents that do less harm! Streamers, banners, pinwheels, and flags can replace balloons at parties and no one will miss them. You can also save time and money by buying reusable decorations instead of ones that will pop or fly into the sky.

For Valentines, instead of crowding the room full of balloons or doing a massive balloon release, try flowers, love letters, or a walk on the beach. Shifting away from balloons is an easy transition to make and it feels good too! Impress your date this Valentine's day by saving a turtle!