

Balloons – colourful killers

Credit: hollywoodhatesme.wordpress.com



Balloons can be an attractive eye-catcher and are often given out or released in large numbers at promotional events or weddings, to raise awareness of a cause, to attract a crowd or remember loved ones. The consequences of such a commercial gimmick are rarely considered: When the deflated or torn remnants of the balloons come back down they can have a devastating effect on the wildlife.

Life story of a balloon

About 95% of released balloons rise to 8,500 m where they expand in the cold and thin air, become brittle and shatter into spaghetti-like pieces that then sink back to earth (*below left*). The remaining 5 % do not reach a high enough altitude to burst and therefore drift with the wind hundreds of kilometres before descending back to the land or the sea (*below centre*). Due to predominant winds and currents balloons and other marine debris often accumulate in predictable areas, overlapping with the foraging and nesting areas of marine animals (*below right: turtle hatchling with deflated balloons*).



Above: Releasing balloons is anti-gravity littering!
Credit: left and right: balloonsblow.org; centre: Kevin Redgrave

Whilst natural latex is extremely biodegradable, the processed latex of the balloons takes as "long as an oak leaf" to decompose. Floating in seawater, this can mean four years to biodegrade. The attached strings and clips or balloons made from mylar foil will last much longer in the environment. In its life span of several months a balloon can harm and kill animals in the water and on land.

Celebrate balloon-free

Try to convince the organiser of an event not to release balloons. Instead, try one of these colourful alternatives that give an event a special character of entertainment, reflection, joy or competitiveness without killing animals or harming the environment:



- Floating flowers or petals
- Blowing bubbles
- Planting a tree
- Hire a ribbon dancer or acrobat
- Flying kites
- Lighting candles
- Displaying flags or banners

Impact

Marine turtles, fish, seabirds, whales and even farm animals get entangled in the strings or swallow the balloon which then blocks the guts so that the animal will starve. Balloon fragments can take four months to pass through a turtle's intestines, preventing them from diving.



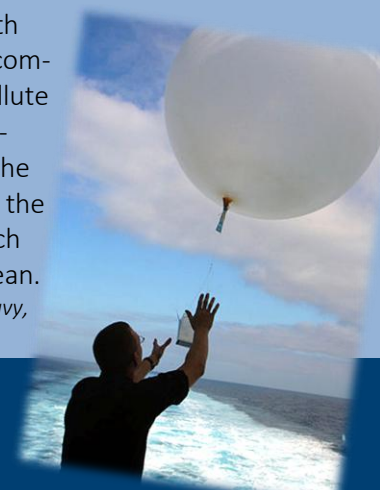
Above left: Shattered balloons are mistaken for jelly fish by turtles and whales. Right: Balloon remnants found in a dead turtle.

Credit top: balloonsblow.org; Christine McGuiness; bottom: coolumcoastcare.org.au; Lance Ferris/ Australian Seabird Rescue

Weather balloons

Up to 100 weather balloons are released every day in Australia to collect data about temperature, pressure and humidity. Weather balloons typically consist of a latex balloon, a styrofoam target or box containing the instruments, a parachute and sometimes a torch. Like other balloons, weather balloons burst and return back to earth where the components pollute the environment, and the batteries of the torches leach into the ocean.

Credit: U.S. Navy, Eric Cutright



AUSTRALIAN MARINE DEBRIS INITIATIVE



For more information or to get involved visit: www.tangaroablue.org

Fact sheet by Angelika Volz