

Balloon Releases

Hundreds, often thousands, of helium filled balloons are routinely released by schools and charities around the world; at corporate and sporting events; open days; weddings and many other special occasions.

The effect can be colourful and stunning, raising money for a good cause and generating publicity.

ENCAMS does not wish to be seen as anti-balloons or as a killjoy. We believe that balloons can be used in many ways to raise money and awareness of an issue, but that mass releases should not be one of these.

After they have been released, a significant proportion of balloons fall back down to earth where they act as a source of litter, take a long time to break down and get mistaken by animals for food.

ENCAMS believes that the best way in which to prevent problems caused by balloon releases is not to release them in the first place.

Balloon releases are not specifically mentioned as littering in the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005. It would be a matter for the courts to decide as to whether they constituted an act of littering. To ENCAMS' knowledge, this has not happened to date.

What are Balloon Releases?

Hundreds, often thousands, of helium filled balloons are released every year by schools and charities around the world; at corporate and sporting events; open days; weddings and many other special occasions.

Balloon releases can be colourful and stunning. They can also be a good way to raise money and generate publicity.

Balloons may also be released accidentally: by members of the public, for example, or from outside shops and other premises.

Many businesses specialise in releases, supplying balloons, and also nets, helium cylinders and valves. Many of these businesses adhere to the National Balloon Association's Code of Conduct¹, which aims to safeguard the environment and includes measures such as using latex balloons, biodegradable parts, single launching and weights to prevent the escape of balloons being sold near release sites.

Are Balloon Releases a Problem?

Although this seems like a simple question, there are two very different answers.

On the one hand, many individuals and organisations believe that mass balloon releases have harmful consequences². According to this position, an estimated 90 – 95% of released balloons rise to an altitude of 5 miles where the temperature and pressure is such that they burst into small fragments that float back down to earth³. The remaining 5 – 10% do not reach a high enough altitude to burst and float back down at least partially inflated. Here, they act as a source of litter, take a long time to degrade and pose a threat to animals that, mistaking balloons for food, ingest them.

On the other hand, there are those who argue there is no scientific evidence that balloons harm animals⁴. According to this position, the small percentage of balloons that do not rise high enough to burst come down at a rate of less than one balloon every 15 square miles³. This area is so wide that balloons are unlikely to be ingested in any great quantity by one animal. Furthermore, the latex from which balloons are made is non-toxic and they biodegrade - breaking down at the same rate as oak tree leaves.

Champions of releases acknowledge that problems may arise if balloons are not properly inflated, made of foil, or non-biodegradable parts are used. However, they point to the Code of Conduct, which states that all releases must be conducted to the same high standards.

ENCAMS does not wish to be seen as anti-balloons or as a killjoy. We believe that there are many ways in which balloons can be used to raise money and awareness of an issue⁵. Mass releases are not, however, one of these. Not only do a significant proportion of released balloons fall back down to earth, once they do they act as a pollutant⁶: harming the environment and the animals in it.

Balloons come back down to earth following a release

According to a study of the environmental effects of balloon releases, between 5 and 10% of released balloons fail to burst and fall back down to earth at least partially inflated⁴. The Marine Conservation Society's Beachwatch Survey carried out in 2004, found 1,684 balloons along a 170.7 km stretch of coastline⁶. This equates to 9.9 balloons per km and numbers have shown an upwards trend since the survey was first conducted in 1996.

There is no record of the number of balloons found in lakes and rivers. If they are found on beaches and at sea, however, it is safe to assume that they will be found in inland water courses and will interfere with filters, pumps and other devices used in the sewage system.

Balloons are not a big source of litter. In the Marine Conservation Society survey, they accounted for only 0.5% of the total amount of litter. In ENCAMS' Local Environmental Quality Survey of England 2004/2005⁸, which monitors 12,000 sites across a range of different land uses, only 64 balloons were found: too few to even register as a category in their own right.

Nonetheless, they are a pollutant and even one can have a damaging effect.

Animals ingest balloons

Several species of animal including dolphins, whales, turtles, fish and seabirds have been reported with balloons in their stomachs⁹. It is believed that they mistake balloons for their natural prey item and ingest them.

If an animal is found dead with a balloon in its digestive system, it is difficult to prove that death occurred as a direct result of ingesting this item or that it interfered with normal foraging in some way. Nonetheless, the presence of the balloon is consistent with the hypothesis that the animal died shortly after ingestion and/or that balloons do not break down quickly under these conditions or are eliminated.

Balloons are not a natural food source and many animals at risk of ingestion are also endangered species. Balloons have no nutritional value and the potential consequences of ingestion include blockage or damage of the digestive track, impairment of foraging behaviour, infection, starvation and even death⁹.

Animals become entangled in balloon parts

During the International Coastal Cleanup, nine instances of an animal entangled in a balloon ribbon or string were recorded¹⁰. This included one invertebrate, seven birds and one mammal. The presence of these parts suggest that not all balloon releases adhere to the National Balloon Association's Code of Conduct or are not undertaken by officials.

Balloon litter occurs worldwide

The International Coastal Cleanup organised by the Ocean Conservancy is a one day event to remove litter and debris from land and underwater. In 2004, this event took place in 88 countries, involved 305,029 people and covered 11,111.6 miles. During this one day, a total of 62,924 balloons were recorded worldwide¹⁰. Balloons were also amongst the top five most dangerous debris items found after bags, fishing nets, rope and plastic sheeting/tarps.

Balloon releases have been banned in a number of American States and in some parts of Australia.

What Can Be Done To Tackle the Problems Caused by Balloon Releases?

The best way to tackle problems caused by balloons that float back down to earth, is do not release them in the first place. There is no specific piece of legislation that can be used to prevent balloon releases, but local authorities, schools, charities and businesses should be discouraged from this practice. Instead, they should seek alternative ways to use balloons as recommended by the Marine Conservation Society⁵. These include prize balloon popping, guess the number of balloons, balloon art and balloon relays.

Are Balloon Releases Acts of Littering?

The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 is the most important piece of legislation since the Environmental Protection Act 1990. It provides local authorities with the powers to improve local environmental quality and was preceded by a lengthy consultation period.

During this consultation period local authorities did not mention problems with balloon-related litter and balloons are not cited as instances of litter in the Act. Nonetheless, the definition of litter is sufficiently broad that it could include a wide range of items. It would be a matter for the courts to decide if balloon releases constituted an act of littering and it would be necessary to prove that an instance of balloon-related litter was caused by a specific release.

To ENCAMS' knowledge this has not happened to date.

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- 1 <http://www.nabas.co.uk/balloon.html>
 - 2 <http://www.ukrivers.net/upupandaway.html>
 - 3 Burchette, D. K. (1989). A study of the effect of balloon releases on the environment.
 - 4 <http://www.balloonhq.com/BalloonCouncil/facts.html#releases>
 - 5 <http://www.mcsuk.org/mcsaction/pollution/wildlife+friendly+balloon+use>
 - 6 The Pollution Prevention and Control Bill Research Paper. 99/58. 1999. House of Commons.
 - 7 Beachwatch 2005: The annual Marine Conservation Society UK beach litter survey report.
 - 8 Local Environmental Quality Survey of England 2004/2005. ENCAMS.
 - 9 Aquatic litter in the UK. 2005. A joint report by the Marine Conservation Society and Thames 21.
 - 10 http://www.coastalcleanup.org/pub1/materials/2004_ICC_Facts.pdf