

Balloons and the Marine Environment



Bird's beak entangled with balloon and string. (Courtesy, The Ocean Conservancy)

Balloons in the marine environment harm and kill animals in the ocean and on land. Whales, turtles, and other marine life often mistake balloons for their natural prey, such as jellyfish and squid. Once eaten, balloons can block the digestive systems of animals, causing a long and painful death through starvation. Even small pieces of latex balloons eaten by turtles clump together, possibly interfering with turtles' digestion and metabolism. Also, balloon string and ribbon have resulted in entanglement, injury, and death of marine life. Birds' feet, wings, and necks often get entangled in plastic items as they feed and migrate in the coastal zone. As balloons continue to be released into the environment at celebrations or unintentionally, they litter our ocean and beaches.

Balloon Use and Misuse

Although the balloon industry claims that latex balloons are *not* harmful to the marine environment, studies and COA Beach Sweeps data show otherwise. The Balloon Council (TBC), an organization of balloon retailers, distributors, and manufacturers, was formed in 1990 to promote "the wonders of metallic and latex balloons." Using one study that "demonstrates that latex balloons decompose at a rate equal to — or faster than — an oak leaf under similar conditions," TBC claims latex balloons are *not* harmful to the environment. However, oak leaves can last *many* months, if not years, in the environment. According to Clean Ocean Action, during any time that balloons are in the marine environment, they can be ingested by marine life, causing harm and death. Also, Mylar (shiny) balloons can harm marine life because they are also mistaken for food and they last longer in the marine environment.

In addition, many balloon releases have been observed to use string or ribbons. Nearly all the pictures on www.BalloonRelease.com show balloons being released with ribbons and strings, and shows balloons released that are tied together. Balloons tied together with string or ribbon can be particularly threatening to marine life through entanglement and ingestion.

Thousands of Balloons Drift onto Beaches in 2003

Using data from the Beach Sweeps, COA assesses the occurrences of balloons on the marine environment. The new datacards in 2003 divided balloons into four subcategories to differentiate between Mylar and rubber/latex balloons, as well as balloons with ribbon or string attached. In 2003, volunteers picked up **4,228** Mylar and rubber balloons with and without string and ribbon from New Jersey's beaches.

After Hurricane Isabel in 2003, an abundance of balloons was found on New Jersey's beaches and reported to COA by concerned citizens. During COA's Student Summit on October 2, students picked up **150** balloons in only a half-mile section of Island Beach State Park (IBSP) in two hours. On October 5, COA's Tony Totah returned to IBSP, walked 1.5 miles of beach, and collected **478** balloons. Rubber balloons accounted for **84%** and mylar balloons accounted for **16%**, with nearly all having plastic ribbons attached and being heavily entangled in Sargasso (seaweed).

Balloons collected off of beaches in 2003 that had contact information included balloons from Manhattan-NY, Danbury-CT, Philadelphia-PA, Riverhead-NY, and Milford-PA. Two red balloons with glow tubes were found from the Light The Night® Walk of the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's balloon release. At the Beach Sweeps in late October 2003, students from Ocean City Intermediate School collected **406** balloons in a one-mile stretch of beach. In Wildwood, a balloon with "2000 Celebration" was found. It could have been in the environment for over 3.5 years.

Stop Balloon Pollution

The large number of balloons on New Jersey's beaches in 2003 and over the years demonstrate that balloons are prevalent and a serious threat to the marine environment. COA supports the safe and responsible use of balloons. Balloons can be used to celebrate any occasion *and* in a manner that does not pollute. When people use balloons outdoors, they need to ensure balloons are well-secured and should not use them on windy days. Balloon releases of any number -- one or thousands -- are organized forms of littering and should never be conducted. The bottom line is: what goes up, must come down -- littering the environment.

In 2003, volunteers collected 4,228 balloons with and without string or ribbon from NJ's beaches.

2003 Entanglements of Marine Life

Plastic in the marine environment can adversely affect marine life in two ways: entanglement or ingestion. Over **80 percent** of entanglements of animals reported to The Ocean Conservancy in the United States involve items made of plastic. The effects of ingested plastic are harder to detect. A number of deaths of birds, sea turtles, whales, and seals have been attributed to plastic blocking their digestive systems.

Data from Beach Sweeps provides some information about wildlife and how it is harmed by debris. In 2003, **63** dead and injured animals were found and reported during the two cleanups. **Sixty** animals were found dead and **three** alive. The three live animals, two horseshoe crabs and a spider crab, were entangled in fishing line. The fishing line was removed and all three were released. The chart to the right shows the numbers and types of dead animals and entanglements recorded.

In sum, a total of **22** entanglements reported: **9** with fishing line, **4** with plastic bags, **2** with string, and **1** each with a plastic mesh bag, balloon ribbon, rope, plastic wrapping, netting, fishing net, and plastic crate.

ANIMALS AFFECTED BY MARINE DEBRIS AS RECORDED AT COA'S BEACH SWEEPS, 2003.

#Dead	Animal	Entanglements	Type
26	Gulls	8	4 fishing line, string, plastic bag, plastic mesh bag, plastic crate
11	Birds	2	fishing line, plastic bag
2	Cormorants	1	rope
2	Ducks	0	
2	Pigeons	0	
1	Crow	1	fishing line
1	Goose	0	
3	Horseshoe Crabs	3	2 fishing line, fishing net
2	Crabs	2	plastic bag, balloon ribbon
1	Sea Turtle	0	
1	Snake	1	plastic bag
1	Sea Horse	1	plastic wrapping
1	Stingray	1	string
4	Squirrels	1	fishing line
1	Rabbit	1	netting