

Balloon and Flying Lantern Litter

Introduction

Keep Scotland Beautiful (KSB) is opposed to balloon and flying lantern releases. This applies to both mylar and latex balloons, to all types of flying lantern produced, and to large or small events.

The impressive visual impact of thousands of balloons or flying lanterns being released into the sky may last a few minutes, but the impact upon the environment and wildlife may last many months, with potentially harmful consequences.

Under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 it is an offence to drop 'or otherwise deposit' litter in a public place and it is therefore questionable whether balloon and flying lantern releases with their potential for littering are within the law. Balloons used in balloon releases are generally made from latex.

A study on balloon persistence in the environment indicated that latex balloons degrade 'faster than an oak leaf' and this is often used in defence of mass balloon releases. However, an oak leaf in a cold water environment may take six months to break down and during this time the balloons can be carried hundreds of miles by sea breezes and currents.

Attachments such as ribbons and string tied to balloons are a particular problem as they can lead to the entanglement of birds and animals. Flying lanterns can travel long distances on the wind, and some have a wire structure which does not degrade.

The Problem

After balloons are released they rise to high altitude where about 90% of latex balloons burst, undergoing what is termed 'brittle fracture'. The balloon pieces then float back to earth over a large area.

However, around 10% of balloons released will come back down to earth without bursting, and these whole balloons pose a particular threat to many animals on land and at sea.

Balloon litter found on beaches during the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) Beachwatch survey has shown a general increase since 1996. In the 2011 Beachwatch survey, a total of 951 balloons & balloon string were recovered, representing a density of 10.5 items/km surveyed and 0.5% of all litter picked up.

Both whole balloons and balloon pieces can cause problems for marine animals. It is believed that they mistake balloons for their natural prey e.g. jellyfish and squid. The following species, all of which occur in the North East Atlantic waters off the UK, have been reported with latex balloons in their digestive system: Common Dolphin; Risso's Dolphin; Loggerhead Turtle; Leatherback Turtle; Blue Shark and the Northern Fulmar.

In 2005, balloons and their ribbon and string accounted for 4% of entanglements of marine creatures recorded over a single weekend.

When flying lanterns float back to earth, their paper walls may degrade but some of these lanterns have wire frames, often covered with bamboo, which will remain. These pose a high risk to animals, especially with the bamboo coating, as livestock have been known to mistake them for food and then have ended up injured, sometimes fatally, after the wire has punctured their internal organs.

Action

Whilst not wishing to prevent fundraising events or spoil peoples' fun, KSB calls on all organisations to support a voluntary ban on balloon and flying lantern releases and to celebrate or commemorate events in more environmentally-friendly ways.

Local authorities are asked to:

- Ban mass balloon and flying lantern releases at any event over which they have control
- Introduce a condition on Entertainment Licenses to prevent balloon and flying lantern release

Individuals are also encouraged to take action:

- If you become aware of a potential balloon or flying lantern release let the organisers know about their negative environmental impact, not everyone knows, and encourage them to look at alternatives.
- Write to your local council and ask them to consider banning mass releases from their premises and any premises or events licensed by them. Corporate bodies who provide sponsorship or other support for charities or events are encouraged to decline to sponsor events involving mass balloon or flying lantern releases and to encourage alternative fund-raising activities.

Corporate bodies who provide sponsorship or other support for charities or events are encouraged to decline to sponsor events involving mass balloon or flying lantern releases and to encourage alternative fund-raising activities.

Alternatives

Instead of just watching balloons & lanterns float away there are many alternative activities which can be made out of them:

Balloon Popping Competition

Release the balloons in an enclosed area (such as a church/school hall). Hide the prize tags in several balloons and children (and adults) rush around popping the balloons to find their prize. The burst balloons can then be easily collected and disposed of.

Balloon Animals

Best done in teams. Prizes can be awarded for the best, biggest, most colourful, etc.

Decorate a hanging lantern

Rather than letting flying lanterns go, why not get together and buy some hanging lanterns and then spend time writing personal messages or decorating them with pretty patterns and pictures before hanging them in an outside space. This could be done to celebrate a wedding or other special occasion, or you could create a unique memorial garden.

Make your own lantern

Have a competition to see who can make the most creative lantern. Each person draws window shapes on a piece of coloured card. Cut the shapes out and glue on coloured tissue paper to make windows. Roll the card into a cylinder and staple. Make two holes at the top & thread string/wool through to hang. These can then be hung around a room to make an attractive display.

Conclusion

This Policy Statement outlines why Keep Scotland Beautiful is opposed to balloon and flying lantern releases.

Keep Scotland Beautiful supports a voluntary ban from local authorities, companies and other organisations on mass balloon and flying lantern releases at any event over which they have control.

It is hoped that publicising this policy and promoting alternatives will also lead to a reduction in smaller scale private releases, especially of lanterns, as the public become more aware of the dangers they pose.

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