



Ban Balloon Releases

July 2012



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The number of balloon & Chinese lantern releases in Ireland appears to be on the increase. The side-effects of these visual displays on our environment can be long-lasting and far-reaching. The Irish Wildlife Trust, Irish Whale and Dolphin Group, Irish Seal Sanctuary and BirdWatch Ireland would like to remind those considering balloon & lantern releases that these frequently have direct negative consequences for wildlife and the environment. This is both an animal welfare and a conservation issue, as it can cause both suffering and population declines.



Balloon manufacturers may insist that balloon latex is biodegradable and that there is little to worry about, as the balloons will simply drift away and burst in the atmosphere. Similarly, many think that Chinese paper lanterns are fully biodegradable, forgetting about their metal wires and sharp bamboo frames. However, what goes up must come down and fragments still enter the environment, releasing toxins which accumulate and can be detected within the tissues of animals. Furthermore, both balloons & lanterns can cause many different

species of animal to become entangled, and can also result in serious risk of choking and environmental contamination.

Latex balloons can take six months to degrade, or up to twelve months in saltwater. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) found that latex can reside in stomachs of sea turtles for up to four months, prompting the Sea Turtle Foundation to propose a balloon ban.



5-10% of balloons released never make it to bursting height (approx. 5 miles), and can often be seen floating at sea. This litter can be deadly for many marine wildlife species, with sea turtles, birds and other surface-feeding animals most at risk, as they can mistake floating balloons for jellyfish and may attempt to eat them. If swallowed, a balloon can block the digestive tract and eventually lead to starvation.



The following species found in Irish waters, five of which are protected, have been reported with latex balloons in their digestive systems: Sperm Whale, Common Dolphin, Risso's Dolphin, Loggerhead Turtle, Leatherback Turtle, Blue Shark and Northern Fulmar. It is likely that many other marine species are also affected – since 1986 scientists have known that > 95% of phytoplankton (essential building blocks of marine ecosystems) are killed by latex rubber within 4 days.

Chinese lanterns have featured prominently in the news recently for a variety of reasons. They present a fire risk and entanglement issues for a range of species. Farmers in the UK have been up in arms as cattle have been found chewing wire and bamboo from lantern remains, resulting in death of livestock. Furthermore lanterns cause havoc with coastguards throughout the UK & Ireland as they are often mistaken for distress flares, wasting both time & money.



Balloon & lantern releases have huge knock-on effects in the environment which has led to legislation in the United States regarding the release of balloons. In the UK there are calls for voluntary bans on both balloon & Chinese lantern releases. The UK Marine Conservation Society found a frightening average of 3 balloons per km of coast surveyed, and one farmer encountered a staggering 57 lanterns on his farm in Wirrel. Once released, balloons & lanterns are no different from other forms of litter and can harm wild, farmed and domestic animals.



Many balloon releases are planned as fundraising or celebratory events; however releasing balloons or lanterns into the environment is essentially 'pretty littering' and cannot be done without thinking about the consequences. We encourage those planning a release to consult our websites for a list of alternatives to consider instead.

(All images were sourced online and are in the public domain).



References:

[UK Rivers Balloon Releases pollution factsheet](#)
[Balloon in Green Turtles \(Marine Pollution Bulletin\)](#)
[Green sea and loggerhead turtles feeding Trials, latex residing in gut for 4 months](#)
[Plastic debris in marine environment](#)
[Phytoplankton](#)
[Chinese Lanterns harmful to environment](#)
[RSPCA Balloon Release factsheet](#)
[Party Balloon lead to Marine bird deaths](#)
[Farmer's photo shows Chinese lantern dangers](#)
[Farmers call for ban on Chinese lanterns](#)
[BalloonsBlow.org](#)

Signed:

Irish Wildlife Trust www.iwt.ie
Irish Whale and Dolphin Group www.iwdg.ie
BirdWatch Ireland www.birdwatchireland.ie
Irish Seal Sanctuary www.irishsealsanctuary.ie

See our websites and Facebook pages for a list of alternatives and for other ways to use balloons in an environmentally responsible way.



Alternative Options

Alternative Environmentally Friendly Balloon Activity Suggestions:

- **Secure balloon release:** secure balloons to the ground with long strings and let them go as planned. The balloons will make a nice display that people can enjoy for a longer time. Give the balloons to kids when they go home, but make sure they know not to let them go!
- **Balloon competition:** fill a car or container with balloons and run a competition to guess how many balloons are inside.
- **Prize balloon popping:** hide prize tickets inside inflated balloons and have people pop the balloons to find the tickets.
- **Balloon artist:** hire a balloon artist to make shapes and animals out of balloons.
- **Balloon relay:** For an interesting twist on an old event, have your relay contestants run to an air-filled balloon. Have them sit on the balloon to try and pop it. They must pop the balloon before running back to tag their next team member. Enjoy laughs all around, watching people sit on balloons to pop them as fast as they can!
- **Indoor balloon release:** release balloons as planned, but play games, or compete to burst as many as possible. Dispose of remains responsibly!

Alternative To Balloon Activities:

- **Flags, banners, and streamers:** why not use reusable eye-catching colourful streamers, flags and banners to save money and time over balloons, ribbons and helium. They are weather-resistant and can be reused again and again!
- **Ribbon dancers:** Instead of giving balloons at parties or events, why not give something a little more engaging? Balloons simply sit tied up, float away to pollute or eventually deflate. Ribbon dancers are also beautiful and require people to move around and have fun!
- **Kites & garden spinners:** kites and spinners can be enjoyed for years, and are also hugely visually appealing and fun!
- **Plant in remembrance:** A great way to honour and remember a loved one is to bring more life to our planet. Why not plant a native tree, flower garden or butterfly garden? You would not only be giving life to those plants but also providing shelter, resources, and clean air to all kinds of wildlife, people and communities. This remembrance will last much longer and can be revisited!
- **Lighting candles:** A great way to remember a loved one or welcome new life is by lighting candles.