



Assateague Coastal Trust - PO Box 731, Berlin, MD 21811 - 410-629-1538

HB 391 – Prohibition of Releasing a Balloon Into the Atmosphere – Environment and Transportation
January 15, 2021
Position: Favorable

Dear Chairman Barve and members of the Committee;

Assateague Coastal Trust (ACT) strongly urges this Committee to support HB391 (Prohibition of Releasing a Balloon Into the Atmosphere), as it is a step toward reducing the negative impact which plastics and marine debris have on the land, waterways, and the biologic community.

ACT is an environmental advocacy organization on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Since 1970, ACT has been the voice for Delmarva's waterways and continues to defend the coastal watershed and surrounding region through community outreach and legislative action.

Acknowledging the ecological harm which marine debris, including balloons, were posing to the northern reaches of Assateague Island National Seashore, ACT initiated the Trash Free Assateague (TFA) program. The northern portion of Assateague Island (referenced as the North Point) is located several hundred yards south of Ocean City, Maryland, separated by an inlet and the Sinepuxent Bay. Despite its relatively isolated location, it is routinely inundated with balloons and balloon fragments, and plastic debris that is arriving by way of tide, swell, wind, and an increase in visitors to this part of the National Seashore in recent years.

To demonstrate the adverse externality which balloons pose to the marine environment, there was one occasion when ACT's Billy Weiland located a conglomerate bunch of still inflated black balloons wedged in the North Point's rock jetty. Could these have been intentionally released at an outdoor memorial service or 50th birthday party?

A balloon release seems a harmless act to many, but the numerous releases have compounding adverse environmental implications. Addressing the known environmental harm which balloons create through the passing of HB 391 is a progressive move toward abating the ever more pressing global scale problem of marine debris and plastic pollution.

Emma Tonge, communications director for the Marine Debris Program at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said researchers in Australia recently suggested that balloon fragments and debris might "be among the most harmful to sea birds, turtles and marine mammals."

Researchers working with NOAA monitoring five uninhabited Virginia coastal beaches, discovered that balloon fragments were the most prevalent type of debris.

ACT has been helping to conduct the Ocean Conservancy International Coastal Clean Up for over 15 years on Assateague Island, sending collection data to Ocean Conservancy. During a nine-year period ending in 2016, the International Coastal Cleanup program found an average of 31,000 balloons on U.S. beaches each year. And that number is likely to be much higher. Assateague Island National Seashore prohibits balloons in the park, yet in 1990 volunteers for the International Coastal Cleanup picked up nearly 30 lbs of balloons off the Virginia ocean beach portion of the island. They found that the balloons came from 52 sources in six states.

The *North Point* of Assateague is a primary example of what has been termed an environmental externality. As the single use plastic habits continue to characterize our modern day society, the adverse effects which that habit inflicts on our environment are not always along the roadway we travel each day or in the parking lot we frequent each week. Often, evidence of this unsustainable habit plague the coasts, waterways, and lands that we don't see on a daily basis. Many of the areas bearing the burden are environments which have long remained natural havens on the Delmarva Peninsula. These areas are natural resources. They are absolutely essential to the quality of the economy and have long been symbolic of the eastern shore. They are areas worth protecting.

Aside of the known threat to marine life and other wildlife, and the adverse health implications which marine debris in the free environment pose, TFA believes that what is on our land and in our waters is representative of the level of respect that we have for our environment, our community, and ourselves.

Our TFA program utilizes a unique approach in addressing the detriment to which marine debris has on coastal environments. It is a philosophical approach that uses the lens of science and a call to action to instill a sense of stewardship.

Respectfully,



W.R. Weiland
Watershed Specialist/TFA Founder
Assateague Coastal Trust