



Marine Education, Research & Rehabilitation Institute, Inc.

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...Dedicated to the conservation of marine mammals and sea turtles and their ocean habitat

January 20th, 2020

The Honorable Wayne Hartman
Maryland House of Delegates
House Office Building, Room 308
6 Bladen St., Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Representative Hartman,

As the founding Director of the Marine Education, Research & Rehabilitation Institute, Inc. (MERR), the non-profit organization that responds to marine mammal and sea turtle strandings in Delaware, I can attest to the myriad of ways in which litter contaminates the marine environment, and directly impacts the lives and welfare of marine animals such as whales, dolphins, seals and sea turtles. Land based litter becomes marine debris once it enters the ocean, causing accidental ingestion, entanglement, and toxication of the marine environment. 80% of oceanic debris originates from land-based sources, with balloons constituting one of the most harmful components of marine debris due to the often fatal effects they have on marine wildlife and ocean health. The soft consistency of balloons causes them to form blockages in the gastrointestinal tract, causing fatal obstructions. Latex and Mylar balloons make up a substantial portion of the marine debris that is found in the ocean and waterways, and litters the shore. All balloons, whether released in mass quantities as in a balloon release, or individually when they escape a child's hand or blow free from a car dealership or real estate open house sign, will ultimately rise into the atmosphere and make their way to the ocean. Some balloons will remain virtually intact, while others will burst into numerous pieces of colorful shreds, both of which when in the water column resemble jellyfish and other tempting food sources for marine animals, making balloons the most likely form of marine debris to cause mortality. When animals ingest these balloons that they mistake for food, the material impacts their stomach and esophagus, causing slow and gruesome starvation, as the animal can no longer ingest actual food. Sea turtles are most commonly affected, making up 58% of the animals that are fatally impacted by balloon ingestion. Delaware and Maryland enjoy 4 different species of sea turtles in the coastal area from May-November. Two of these species are endangered, making it all the more imperative to protect their habitat from the unnecessary deadly presence of balloons.

In addition to the horrific effects of balloon ingestion are the painful and fatal entanglements from the ribbons that are often attached to the balloons. These ribbons constrict limbs and airways causing strangulation and injury, and can become entangled around underwater objects, causing the animal to drown. It is ironic that balloons have been associated with celebrations of life's milestones, when in reality they are the causes of needless death for so many species of animals, including endangered species.

Additionally, the materials and the production of balloons are toxic. Latex balloons contain plastic and chemicals that contribute to the toxicity of the marine ecosystem, degrading water quality and leaching into the tissues of fish and other organisms that will ultimately be consumed by humans, as well as dolphins, whales and seals. Latex balloons can take up to 4 years to degrade, posing threats to marine life that entire time. Mylar balloons are highly toxic due to their composition, production, and inability to biodegrade. The Environmental Protection Agency and the US Fish and Wildlife Service have denounced the use of

balloons, and specifically balloon releases, due to their significant adverse impacts on the state of the environment and wildlife.

Balloons travel great distances from their point of origin, oftentimes contaminating neighboring states and regions. Balloon releases that occur in Delaware and Maryland can travel more than 1,000 miles to impact animals all along the eastern seaboard from Maine to Florida. Added to the daunting expanse of this impact range is the fact that most of the marine creatures that our organization strives to protect migrate and travel hundreds and thousands of miles every year. The combined effect creates a widespread problem that has both a local and global impact, and is cause for residents of the Del-Mar area to make more responsible choices in regard to our role in protecting the environment from something as non-essential as balloons.

The state of Delaware is also considering legislation to ban balloon releases. MERR views this effort as an optimum time for neighboring states to achieve an even more impactful effort to protect the marine environment from land based litter. MERR applauds any and all efforts to address the problems associated with balloon releases, and the harm that their presence causes in the marine environment. MERR represents many members of the public who share the concerns of protecting the environment from the ill effects of balloons, so on behalf of their interests, and those of the marine animals who are helpless to defend themselves against our human made pollution, I thank you for considering solutions to this important issue. Please do not hesitate to call on us if we can be of any assistance.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Suzanne Thurman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Suzanne" and last name "Thurman" clearly distinguishable.

Suzanne Thurman
Executive Director



Balloon and balloon ribbons entangling a 2 month old gray seal pup. The seal was gasping for breath when rescued at the south side of Indian River Inlet, and was beginning to become comatose. In addition, the ribbons and netting had cut a 3-inch gaping wound into the back of the neck.



This loggerhead sea turtle that stranded at Slaughter Beach, DE was nicknamed “Plastic Turtle” due to its ingestion of copious amounts of marine debris including balloons. The result was fatal for this animal, who had ingested more than 65 different sources of marine debris, including balloon fragments.



Balloons are the number one cause of sea bird mortality.