Don’t Let Go booklet

Protecting our seas, shores and wildlife
Balloons & Sky lanterns- What’s the problem?

Intentionally letting go of balloons and sky lanterns can cause big problems for wildlife both on land and at sea.

Choking and entanglement are the biggest dangers that balloons and lanterns cause when they float back down to earth. A turtle searching for food may mistake a deflated balloon for a jellyfish and swallow it up – the problem is the balloon will block the turtles digestive system and lead to starvation and eventually death.

**FACT** Dolphins, whales, turtles and seabirds have all been reported with balloons in their stomachs.
Going up...
We all know throwing rubbish on the ground is an act of littering and can mean a fine, but letting a balloon or sky lantern go isn’t classed as littering...even though what goes up will eventually fall back to earth.

Deflated...
If you cut up a deflated balloon or you tear up a sky lantern and then dropped the bits on the floor you would be fined for littering, but you can release hundreds - thousands even - of balloons and sky lanterns and you won’t be committing a crime despite the fact they will float back down, somewhere. And they do, in their thousands!

FACT If swallowed, balloons can block an animal’s gut and cause it to starve.
MCS Beachwatch Big Weekend beach litter surveys have shown an increase in balloon litter levels since we started recording them in 1996. In fact, the average number of balloons and balloon pieces found on UK beaches were three times as much in 2011 as they were in 1996!

We found a whopping 1,359 bits of balloon litter during Beachwatch Big Weekend 2011.
Balloon facts

- The main types of balloons are latex (rubber) and foil (also known as mylar).
- The majority of balloons used in intentional releases are latex, also known as biodegradable balloons – but even they can take several months, if not years, to break down.
- Because of the threat posed to wildlife by balloons, releases have been banned by over 20 local authorities in the UK.
- Helium – the gas used to fill balloons for releases – is running out...even more reason to conserve what stocks we have left and not waste it on a few seconds of enjoyment. Helium is used to purge rocket engines for NASA and the military. It is crucial for diving equipment, particle accelerators, and MRI scanners.
- The International Coastal Clean-up (which has involved millions of volunteers in over 150 countries cleaning beaches and rivers) revealed that 1,248,892 balloon litter items have been recorded washed up on beaches over the last 25 years.
- 10% of balloons that are released, and that don’t burst, still return to earth or sea intact or partially inflated where they pose a serious threat to wildlife.
- Balloons can be transported long distances by air currents and can easily be blown thousands of miles from their release point. Balloons released in Cardiff were found in Germany.

Protecting our seas, shores and wildlife

FACT Animals and birds get tangled up in balloon ribbon/string, restricting movement and the ability to eat.
Protecting our seas, shores and wildlife

- The metal sky lantern frame is dangerous to wildlife and poses an entanglement threat.
- Livestock are being killed from eating degraded lanterns which are accidentally picked up by harvest machinery and put into winter feeds. In 2010 it was reported that a Cheshire farmer lost one of his pedigree cattle worth £1,000 after it died from eating the wire frame from a lantern.
- Lanterns also pose a fire hazard to crops in summer months and to thatched roof properties.
- Lanterns floating over the sea have been mistaken for distress flares and resulted in false alarm call outs of coastguard staff.
- It is illegal to launch a sky lantern in most parts of Germany, and in Austria it is illegal to produce, sell, import them, or to distribute them.
- A permanent ban on sky lanterns that "rely on an open flame to heat the air inside the lantern" was made in Australia on 1 February 2011.
- The release of sky lanterns has also been banned in Malta, Vietnam and most recently Spain.

Sky lantern facts
Seven steps to stopping a planned release going ahead

1. Keep an eye out for advertised releases in local press/internet/newsletters etc.
2. Make sure you know what the release is for – always be sensitive if the event is for a bereavement or is a memorial event.
3. Contact organisers on Facebook, Twitter, via their website, via email, via phone or by downloading and sending the letter at the end of this pack and ask them (very politely) to reconsider their plan by listing the risks outlined in this booklet.
4. If the event follows a bereavement DO NOT contact the family direct… but the charity or organisation who may be behind the event. If you feel uncomfortable doing this then let MCS know and we’ll contact them for you.
5. Be polite and ensure they are aware that your are not a killjoy…but just want to make them aware of the dangers.
6. Suggest alternatives – email the lists from our download page.
7. Wait for a positive result! Of course you may not get a positive response immediately. It’s really important to use your common sense and not to inflame a situation. If you’re not getting a good vibe, don’t keep ringing and contacting. We won’t be able to stop every release but even if you don’t stop this one… the organisation may think twice about setting up another one. Education is the key – together we can start the ball rolling and stop balloons floating.

You can help stop balloon and lantern releases by explaining to people why letting go is a bad idea. You’ll be surprised how many individuals and organisations have no idea of the dangers balloons and lanterns pose to wildlife and how many are happy to do something else as a fundraiser or awareness raiser.

Report your success to MCS so we can pass it on: www.mcsuk.org/url/dontletgo

Write on our Facebook page or tweet us.
Alternatives

Balloons and lanterns are often let go by charities, schools, playgroups and clubs as fundraisers, at weddings, christenings and birthdays as an act of celebration, or by businesses to put their brand ‘out there’.

MCS has come up with some alternatives to balloons and lanterns releases that are environmentally friendly and just as much fun!

Balloon sculpture
Turn balloons into something stunning with a hired-in balloon artist or follow our easy steps guide to making a few simple balloons into something stunning.

Flags, banners & pop-ups
When budgets are tight many businesses are realising the benefits of using reusable eye-catching signage. Colourful streamers, flags, banners and other signs save money and time over balloons, string, helium and lanterns. And you can use them again and again!

Pop a balloon
If you do need to let balloons go then do it indoors! Put a raffle ticket in a few balloons before blowing them up...let them go and ask people to pop them...the raffle ticket indicates the prize! No ticket, no prize but you get to go again. Make sure you dispose of the pieces properly.

How many?
Fill up a car with blown up balloons and then get people to guess how many there are. The closest guess wins...maybe not the car but another prize! Just remember not to let them go afterwards.

Virtual balloons & races
Our friends at RSPB have launched a new virtual balloon race where you can design and personalise your balloon and then track it on Google maps, whilst never letting go! https://rspb.rentaballoonrace.com/admin
www.tributeballoon.com has allowed over seven million people to let go of a balloon virtually whether for loved ones or for causes that matter. Get involved with no risk to the environment.

Protecting our seas, shores and wildlife
Memorial alternatives

Light a candle
Rather than bringing a balloon or lantern for release, people can light candles, nightlights, static lanterns or solar garden lights - a good number of these will create an ambient reflective and peaceful atmosphere.

Blowing bubbles
Sounds trite but blowing bubbles into the sky gives the same feeling of release that letting go of a balloon or lantern achieves...and you can do it again and again. If some people bring torches and shine them as the bubbles go up, the effect is spectacular.

A minutes applause
Often used to acknowledge someone's passing at football and rugby matches. The sound and focus can be a really cathartic experience as everyone reflects on the person's life for an intense minute.

Planting a tree...
Plant a tree to remember a loved one:
You could do this via the Woodwatch plant-a-tree scheme where you can also dedicate a tree to a loved one:
www.woodlandtrustshop.com/dedicate-a-tree

FACT
Turtles are particularly at risk as they can confuse balloons with their jellyfish prey.
Dear Event Organiser

Please consider an environmentally friendly alternative to your planned (balloon/lantern) release.

I am writing to let you know that releasing balloons or sky lanterns has been proven to damage wildlife both on land and in the marine environment, often leading to serious injury and even death.

In writing to you, I am supporting The Marine Conservation Society (MCS), the UK's leading marine charity, which urges organisations to carry out fundraising events that don't cause harm to wildlife.

The MCS annual report on the litter found on beach cleans found 1,359 balloons or balloon pieces on 335 beaches in just one weekend in 2011. That's an average of 9.5 balloons every kilometre. These balloons represent only a fraction of the numbers that will be in the sea.

MCS knows that most event organisers wouldn't be aware of the dangers of releasing balloons and lanterns. But what goes up will eventually come down either as a whole or in pieces. As well as littering land and oceans, many species of wildlife mistake balloons in particular for food.

Balloons have been found ingested in endangered turtles, dolphins, whales and seabirds. A green turtle that stranded on a beach near Blackpool was found to have its gut blocked by plastic pieces and a balloon.

Balloons are not readily biodegradable. Even ones marketed as being made of biodegradable latex are a danger, as they may last in the marine environment for up to four years. Plastic ribbon or string, attached to the balloons, will never biodegrade.

The metal or bamboo frames of sky lantern frames are dangerous to wildlife and livestock, posing an entanglement threat. Plus, there are mounting concerns from farmers with livestock dying after eating degraded lanterns, which are accidentally picked up by harvesting machinery and put into winter feeds. A Cheshire farmer lost one of his pedigree cattle worth £1,000 after it died from eating the wire frame from a lantern. The NFU and RSPCA are calling for a ban on lanterns if their concerns are not addressed.

Lanterns pose a fire risk to crops in the summer months, to thatched roof properties, and are causing a number of false alarm call outs on the coast as people mistake them for distress flares.

Please consider choosing a different fundraising event this time around and also introducing a ban on balloon and lantern releases long term within your (organisation/charity/school). MCS has some event alternatives on our website at www.mcsuk.org/dontletgo.

MCS is keen to publicise any organisation that has decided to be environmentally responsible and has chosen to avoid unnecessary risks to marine wildlife and has sought alternatives to harmful balloon releases. We do this via our Facebook and Twitter feeds and we are happy to help you with a press release to promote your decision to stop an environmentally damaging event.

The call to ban balloon releases is supported by the RSPCA, RSPB and the National Farmers Union as well as several national companies such as Norwich Union, TGI Fridays and Marks and Spencer. Pancreatic Cancer UK and Sainsbury’s have also recently phased out the use of balloons for promotional and fundraising events.

Thank you for taking the time to read this, and please don’t hesitate to get in touch if you require further information.

Yours sincerely,

[Your Address]
[Today's Date]
Resources for you to download and use...

A4 Posters
Posters that you can download and print to promote ‘Don’t let Go…’

A5 leaflet
A leaflet that you can download and print to spread the word

Alternatives for memorials
Alternatives for other events