

Marine Conservation Society POSITION STATEMENT ON: Balloon and Sky Lantern Releases

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Geographical extent: UK

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This document constitutes the formal expression of a Marine Conservation Society position on an issue of concern to us, at a particular point in time. It is not to be edited altered or misconstrued. Please get in touch if you wish to discuss it or need any clarifications. We are always open to constructive discussion and our views may change over time, in light of new evidence or changes in policy context.

KEY ASKS

The Marine Conservation Society has been calling for;

1. Local authorities and councils to ban mass balloon releases and lantern releases.
2. Balloons and lanterns to be classified as litter and outdoor releases made illegal.
3. Balloon sticks should be banned.

THE MARINE CONSERVATION SOCIETY VIEW

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. Certain species (such as endangered marine turtles) confuse balloons/balloon fragments for food¹. We want to avoid any forms of litter entering the sea – either directly or indirectly. The main types of

balloons are latex (rubber) and foil (also known as mylar). Latex balloons, whilst biodegradable, are known to last a number of months, even years².

Metal sky lantern frames are also dangerous to wildlife and pose an entanglement threat. Livestock have been killed by eating degraded lanterns³ which are accidentally picked up by harvest machinery and put into winter feeds. Lanterns also pose a fire hazard and have been mistaken over sea for distress flares⁴.

We are aware that balloons may also be used for research purposes, for example, weather balloons. We do not wish to restrict the release of these, as we believe the number involved to be minimal compared to the current number of intentionally released balloons for commemorative, social or publicity events.

THE MARINE CONSERVATION SOCIETY ASKS

Currently 105 Local Authorities across the UK have voluntary bans in place⁵ for either lantern or balloon releases (some have banned both). You can see the full list on the [Marine Conservation Society website](#). We are asking for all local authorities to ban mass balloon and lantern releases.

We have seen progress on our ask to ban balloon sticks in line with the EU Single plastic Directive with Scotland banning supply in 2022⁶ and England and Wales banning supply in 2023⁷. At the time of writing there has been no regulation passed in Northern Ireland to ban balloon sticks.

Balloons and lanterns should be classified as outdoor releases made illegal under existing legislation such as the Environmental Protection Act 1990 or the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005.

WHAT THE MARINE CONSERVATION SOCIETY IS DOING

Our 2025 Beachwatch data highlighted that 39% of UK beaches had balloon related litter on them. This balloon litter can be eaten by marine life, entangle turtles or sea birds and may result in premature death by choking, starvation or strangulation⁹.

Many people don't know that balloons and lanterns pose these threats to wildlife, which is why there are so many fundraising or awareness events still using them.

While anyone knowingly throwing litter on the ground could be fined, letting go of a balloon or a lantern, which is just as problematic, isn't treated in the same way.

That's why we're highlighting the issue with our *Don't Let Go* messaging – to help prevent harm to wildlife and reduce litter levels on our beautiful beaches.

We've already had some success with our campaigning, with single-use plastic balloon sticks now banned in England, Scotland and Wales – but we still need action on balloon and lantern releases.

The largest ever balloon release was over 1.4 million balloons and took place in Cleveland, Ohio in 1986. Not only did this have disastrous repercussions for people in the area, but it also caused massive issues to the environment. Lake Erie was described as an "asteroid field" of balloons because of the large number that landed in its water. The effect that the large number of latex balloons had on the wildlife surrounding the Great Lake is unimaginable.

In March 2024 Florida introduced a new law that bans the intentional release of balloons¹⁰. This replaces an already existing ban which prevented the release of ten or more balloons within 24 hours. By learning from the disaster in Ohio and continuing to build upon the prevention work already in place, we hope to see more US states and our councils back in

the UK see the impact balloon releases can have on the environment and take necessary action to prevent further damage caused by balloons.

References

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5. <https://www.mcsuk.org/what-you-can-do/ocean-friendly-living/dontletgo/dontletgo-councils/>
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¹ <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0040884>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0304389420316150>

³ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/mobile/uk/8490524.stm>

⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/mobile/uk/8490524.stm>

⁵ <https://www.mcsuk.org/what-you-can-do/ocean-friendly-living/dontletgo/dontletgo-councils/>

⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/news/single-use-plastics-ban/>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/single-use-plastics-bans-and-restrictions>

⁸ <https://www.gov.wales/environmental-protection-single-use-plastic-products-wales-act>

⁹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-018-36585-9>

¹⁰ <https://oceanographicmagazine.com/news/florida-bans-the-intentional-release-of-balloons/>