

# Balloons – Celebration or Devastation?

By Tori Preddy

What goes up must come down, sometimes with devastating consequences. For years balloons have been a symbol of celebration; from birthdays to weddings, baby showers to parades, and everything in between. Unfortunately, these festive decorations are wreaking havoc on the environment. At best they end up as pollution in our streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans. At worst they choke and entangle marine wildlife and birds.

The waters of Howe Sound, so close to the bustling cities of Metro Vancouver, have become a catchment basin for many of these runaway or ‘escapee’ balloons. MLSS directors and divers have removed a lot of these balloons out of the water just this last year. On almost any given day, if we keep our eyes open, we’re able to find at least one balloon floating through the water. With the layout of our coastline, many balloons can drift a lot further than you may think. For example, if you release a balloon from Horseshoe Bay during the summer afternoon, the wind could send the balloon northward, directly into the Howe Sound!



There are two main materials used for balloons: latex and mylar. Latex balloons are often marketed as “bio-degradable”; however, realistically it can take years for balloons to degrade with wildlife being harmed in the interim. While natural latex is biodegradable and environmentally safe, the material we commonly use is treated with ammonia, tetramethyl thiuram disulfide and zinc oxide to preserve against decomposition. Sewage treatment plants have reported that latex is one of several problem materials that is not affected by the biological treatment systems.

*“Animals mistake remains from balloons for food, which may cause blockage of stomach and intestines and may lead to starvation. Latex rubber, in spite of its natural origin, does not degrade quickly enough to avoid ingestion by marine wildlife and potential damage to their digestive system.” – Dr. Jan Andries van Franeker, Wageningen University & Research Centre, Degradable Balloons are Not the Solution.*

*“Latex balloons float for just 10 hours, but can take a year or more to degrade, long enough to repeatedly wrap around [or be] ingested by turtles, sea birds and marine mammals. Scientists who work with stranded whales, dolphins, seals and sea turtles have found balloons, parts of balloons and balloon string in the stomachs of many of these dead animals.” – Patricia Sullivan, Honolulu Environmental Policy Examiner, Balloons Kill Marine Animals.*

Mylar balloons are not in any way biodegradable and should never be released. These balloons are often coated with a metallic finish and come in a variety of shapes and designs. They are made with mylar

nylon and metallicized polyester which is harmful to the environment in both production and in disposal.

Currently, around the world efforts have been made to clean up the mess of balloons littering our oceans. Many organizations host beach 'clean-ups', and underwater clean-ups that rely on volunteers to pick up the litter. Organizations such as Ocean Wise with its Shoreline Clean-up events have been recording data on collected marine pollution since 1994. The Blue Ocean Society has been recording debris observed from whale watch boats off the New England coasts for 17 years. Since then, the boats have observed 30,827 pieces of trash, with 34.9% of that being balloons. Balloons have become the most common debris they have found in the past five years, as escapee balloons can float far beyond the reach of volunteer cleaners.

While clean up and data collection efforts are helpful, the real solution is to stop using balloons. Other celebratory decorations are more environmentally friendly. Some include reusable banners, flags and streamers, blowing bubbles, tissue paper pom-poms, flowers and live plants, and more! By all means, do remove escapee balloons that you find in our local waters, but next time you're throwing a celebration please consider the survival of marine life as you pick your décor!



These photos were taken by MLSS President Glen Dennison on a single afternoon cruising around Howe Sound.