

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Balloons No Cause for Celebration

There are alternatives to releasing balloons, which pose an extreme hazard to marine animals

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 02.08.2010



Have you ever heard of [George](#), who played with a dangerous toy and suffered a catastrophe of considerable proportions? I used to recite this children's poem by [Hilaire Belloc](#), wherein George's balloon floats over to a candle flame and "being of a dangerous sort, exploded with a loud retort."

What follows in this epic poem is a minute-by-minute description of the unfolding disaster, resulting in the deaths of cousins and other children, footmen and grooms, maids and ministers. Poor George suffers a nasty lump behind his ear.

I always delighted in the preposterous idea that something as benign as a balloon — a symbol of celebration — could spell disaster. That made it all the more shocking when it turned out to

be true.

In the past few years, beachgoers around the world have awakened to the effect of balloons on marine animals. Dolphins, seabirds, fish, sea turtles and even whales have been necropsied to find balloons in their stomachs, which most likely contributed to their deaths. They apparently mistake balloons for food such as jellyfish and squid.

I witnessed one problem firsthand on [Santa Barbara Island](#), when a group of us watched a floppy clutch of black and pink balloons terrorize a pride of sea lions. The balloons floated into the sea cave, where they were protecting their young. There was no mistaking the sea lions' sharp barks for a celebration.

A [UCSB](#) online article from August 2009 pointed out the danger of balloons and other such litter as six-pack rings and plastic bags.

"Even if they don't choke, ingestion of such plastics can result in slow starvation due to blockage of the digestive system, genetic problems and slow poisoning due to the build up of pollutants in the plastic debris," Bill Norrington wrote. He was addressing the marine trash islands such as the [Great Pacific Garbage Patch](#) in the eastern Pacific Ocean.

According to [Clean Virginia Waterways](#), seaside states such as Connecticut, Florida, Tennessee, New York, Texas, California and Virginia have laws against a mass release of balloons. Other

localities, such as Santa Barbara, either have such regulations or are working with controlling balloon releases under current ordinances.

Fortunately, there are lots of great alternatives. Conservation society Web sites from Monterey to Great Britain suggest other festive activities, such as planting a tree in the name of a new baby or creating a wildlife garden to attract butterflies and birds. You can hang wind socks or fly kites. Blowing bubbles is a good alternative at children's parties, while school celebrations can create excitement with bands, banners, singers and giveaways.

If you're part of an organization that enjoys balloon releases, help it draft a voluntary ban on balloon releases — becoming part of the solution instead of the problem. If you find a balloon on the beach with a logo, send it back to the company with this column and ask it to use alternatives.

If you're a follower of the "guns don't kill people, people kill people" logic, there are ways to use balloons without endangering wildlife. Look for biodegradable balloons. Use balloons without helium, dropping them from a tall place (and then retrieving them). Kick and play with them before popping each one and disposing of them safely. Instead of a symbolic release of helium balloons, you can write on balloons, share the messages and then pop them ceremoniously.

Belloc was certainly ahead of his time. His tongue-in-cheek poem ends with the warning, "The moral is that little boys should not be given dangerous toys." To which I add a final couplet, "Little girls should shun balloons and go for pearls" — but that's another issue.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*