

Guidelines for balloon releases

With more and more charities and schools using balloon releases for publicity, it is essential that guidelines are followed in order to minimise any damage to the environment. NABAS, the balloon association, has produced the following code of conduct and suggests that local authorities and environmental health officers should pass on these guidelines to schools and enquirers:-

Guide to Balloon Releases

This information and the Guidelines and Code of Conduct are provided for people and organisations planning their own balloon release for fund raising or any other purpose. We strongly recommend that only a small balloon release should be attempted without professional assistance. Small being defined as anything up to 1000 balloons. This guidance is designed to minimize the risk of any potential danger to animals, sea creatures and the general environment.

What happens when a Balloon is released?

A scientific survey carried out in 1989 revealed that on release a balloon will float up to a height of approximately 5 miles and then it becomes brittle and shatters into miniscule pieces falling back to earth at a rate of circa one piece every 5 square miles. Problems can arise when a balloon is not inflated properly or fully or is carrying too much weight and therefore does not reach the height at which shattering occurs. This situation causes a potential danger to wildlife and the environment.

What can I do to reduce this risk?

The Balloon Industry has produced a Code of Conduct, with input from leading environmental organisations; you should follow this advice to the letter.

Conclusion

Balloon releases are fun, spectacular and fulfil a variety of promotional and fundraising objectives. However if best practice is not followed major problems can occur.

If you require any further clarification or need advice please contact NABAS, The Balloon Industry's only independent association on 01989 762 204.

Applying for permission from the civil aviation authority

It is a requirement that if you are releasing more than 5,000 balloons you must apply in writing for permission to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) at least 28 days in advance of the release because balloons can interfere with air traffic. The CAA also like to be informed of balloon releases up to 5,000.

A form can be obtained by calling either the NABAS office on 01989 762 204 or the Airspace Utilisation Section of the CAA on 020 7453 6599

Our Environment and Latex Balloons

What are balloons made of?

There are basically two types of balloons, foil balloons and latex balloons. The foil balloons (often referred to as mylar), are a bladder made of nylon that is covered with a layer of aluminium that is 0.0015 of an inch thick. Latex balloons are made from the sap of rubber trees - a completely natural substance.

Are latex balloons biodegradable?

Yes. Latex is the product of rubber tree sap, it breaks down when exposed to the elements of nature.

How long does it take for a balloon to biodegrade?

Oxidation is the first step in the breakdown of a latex balloon and it begins within approximately one hour of inflation. Oxidation is visible in some types of balloons as a cloudy appearance. This is most evident when the balloon is exposed to direct sunlight, heat or normal outdoor conditions.

Research was carried out in July 1989 with a variety of balloons under various conditions to accurately gauge the time needed for the latex to degrade. Results from this study indicate that the decomposition time for balloons is about the same rate as an oak leaf (6 months).

Is it true that balloons have been found ingested by sea animals?

Some cases have been reported, but balloon fragments are unlikely to cause harm if accidentally ingested. This is because latex and the dyes used in latex colouring are non-toxic. However problems may occur if a partially inflated balloon is ingested, causing possible blockage of the alimentary tract.

Code of Conduct

NABAS is very aware of its responsibilities to the environment. This Code of Conduct was produced to formalise the principles for balloon releases, which have long been the standard for the Industry. It is extremely important that everyone adheres to this code in the interest of safeguarding the environment.

1. Only natural latex rubber balloons will be used for Releases

Latex, being an organic product degrades naturally in the environment. Balloons made of any material other than latex and in particular foil balloons should not be used for Releases.

2. All components used in balloon releases must be biodegradable

Balloons must be hand tied, plastic valves should not be used. Any attached labels must be of paper, preferably recycled.

3. Only helium gas should be used to inflate the balloons

Helium is an inert lighter-than-air gas. As the balloon rises, the gas expands until eventually the balloon bursts producing small fragments, which aid decomposition.

4. No ribbons or strings must be attached to the balloons

Ribbons and strings represent a potential problem and must never be used in balloon releases. Labels should be attached via the hand tied balloon knot.

5. Balloons must always be launched singly

Single balloons disperse easily and quickly. They must never be tied together in bunches for balloon releases.

6. Full approval must be obtained from the relevant authorities

Releases exceeding 5000 balloons should not take place unless they have been cleared in advance with all relevant air traffic and local authorities. The Authorities must be notified in writing at least 28 days prior to the release.

7. Maximum balloon size

Balloons larger than 12" can not be released. It is forbidden to use balloons containing any metallic pigment.

8. All balloons sold near balloon releases must be weighted

Any balloons sold in the vicinity of a balloon release must be sold with a weight attached to ensure they cannot escape. Foil Balloons must never be released. Latex balloons with a plastic valve and ribbon must also be weighted.