

Petition 116 - To Ban Helium Balloons.

This submission is to provide information to assist in the discussion in Parliament on the petition raising the possibility of the Western Australia Government banning the use of helium party balloons. These balloons are often released outdoors and pose a serious threat to the environment. Releasing these balloons is littering and should be treated as such.

In my lifetime, over the last fifty years, our environment has suffered from many forms of stress, due to perceived 'progress'. As an environmental volunteer, with Keep Australia Beautiful, I see the results of years of neglect and abuse of the natural world.

A major concern is plastic washed up on Esperance beaches, from decades of waste dumping at sea. Walking on the beaches, picking up micro plastics and fishing ropes, I have found the remnants of several helium party balloons, still with the decorative ribbons intact. These have been found in the gut of marine animals, and also are known to affect birdlife.

Helium party balloons break down into smaller pieces of plastic, and are eaten by birds and fish, when mistaken for food. Plastic also contaminates the ocean and our food supply. The ribbons are virtually indestructible and can tangle and strangle birds, seals, whales and fish. Fish and seabirds in the Southern Ocean have been found with plastic remnants in their guts, slowly killing them, as they die from malnutrition. Mutton birds routinely now feed their young on small regurgitated pieces of plastic that they have mistaken as food.

Apart from the poisons released into the environment from degrading plastic waste, and the effect on wildlife and our own human health as consumers of seafood, plastic also poses a threat to the beauty of the beach. A walk on the beach used to be an opportunity to admire the diversity of shells washed up on the sand. Now, the sand is scattered with a multitude of coloured micro plastics washed in on the tide, much of it many years old.

Recently a major cruise liner company was fined for dumping plastics at sea, despite years of regulations banning this practice. What is the difference between throwing multiple balloons into the ocean, (where most of the balloons end up) and deliberate dumping?

Even the balloons that blow inland pose a threat to the environment. Plastic contains toxic chemicals, which contaminate soils and water resources. They sometimes have flower seed packets attached, which could pose a potential weed threat to the indigenous plant species.

Helium balloons for meteorology are a necessary exception. Helium gas, a finite resource, should be reserved for scientific use, and not wasted on unnecessary party balloon releases.

Helium party balloons are just another consumer item that people have come to accept, without considering their impact. Please contemplate the results of continued abuse of the once pristine natural environment and do all you can to preserve the health of our State.

by Keep Esperance Beautiful co-founder, Jennifer Morcombe.