**Balloon Debris: A Rising Concern in the Mid-Atlantic**

**Why Focus on Balloons?**

Balloon marine debris is of immediate concern to the Atlantic Coast because of its potentially severe impact on marine life. More than 270 experts in marine debris, averaging 12 years of experience in their field, were asked by the Ocean Conservancy to rank the severity of impacts of marine debris on seabirds, sea turtles and marine mammals. Balloons were ranked in the number three spot due to the likelihood of entanglement or ingestion by marine life.

Balloons are unique among all the man-made litter and debris found in the ocean and on the land because helium-filled balloons (and their attachments including plastic valves, disks and ribbons) are a form of litter that people actually purchase with the intent to release them into the environment. Some people make the connection that when balloons go up they come back to Earth as potentially harmful litter. However, too many participate in balloon releases without making this connection.

**Balloon Debris by the Numbers**

In 2016-2017, volunteers participating in the International Coastal Cleanup (ICC) found and reported more than 14,700 littered balloons in Mid-Atlantic states - New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland and Virginia. Of these, 7,383 balloons were found in New York. New Jersey volunteers reported 2,832 balloon litter items, and Virginia volunteers found 2,414 balloons.

ICC data in one mid-Atlantic state—Virginia—reveals that most of the balloon litter is found on its beaches, demonstrating that balloon litter accumulates in coastal environments. During a recent 5-year (2013-2017) monitoring project on remote islands of Virginia, up to 272 balloons were recorded per mile of beach. The study, which documented a total of 11,441 balloons and balloon-related pieces of litter (e.g., plastic ribbons), also found that balloon litter was the top marine debris item on the beaches that were surveyed. Plastic beverage bottles were in second place.

**Impacts of Balloon Debris**

Released balloons can drift hundreds of miles and out over our oceans. Latex balloons burst in the atmosphere (photo top right), so that when they fall into the water they resemble jelly fish, a favorite food of sea turtles like the Kemp’s ridley shown above with plastic ribbon attached to a balloon protruding from its mouth. Birds are also easily entangled in the balloons and their ribbons. Most of the osprey chick’s nest at right is filled with balloons and ribbons. Foil balloons that become entangled in power lines can cause wide-spread power outages.

**What is Marine Debris?**

Our oceans are filled with items that do not belong there, making marine debris one of the most widespread pollution problems facing the world’s ocean and waterways. According to NOAA’s Marine Debris Program, marine debris is defined as any persistent solid material that is manufactured or processed and directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, disposed of or abandoned into the marine environment or the Great Lakes. Marine debris is a global problem, and it is an everyday problem.
Expanding the Campaign

Prior to expansion, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean (MARCO), which includes Virginia, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland, began working with the founder of Community-Based Social Marketing, Doug McKenzie-Mohr, to evaluate the Joyful Send-off campaign pilot strategy and outcomes to date. The partners are also working with a marketing firm to conduct additional research and testing to confirm that the Joyful Send-off campaign strategy will be effective in reducing balloon releases and debris in the Mid-Atlantic region.

The Mid-Atlantic expansion is being funded by a grant from NOAA’s Marine Debris Program to MARCO. The Mid-Atlantic partners plan to implement a campaign they hope will be scalable beyond the target communities and transferable to other regions of the United States.

Since balloons can travel great distances, measuring success presents challenges. Project partners will measure current balloon litter on beaches and monitor this litter during the implementation of the regional campaign (until 2021). All the states will use a Balloon Debris Monitoring Protocol developed by Virginia.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
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