

Level: B1 Intermedio

Skill: reading



Beach Balloon Ban

US beach town bans balloons to save the ocean

Laguna Beach – the California city known for surfers, waves, and rolling hills – made headlines for passing a strict ban on the sale and use of balloons. The reasons were wildfire risk and the fact that balloons are a huge source of waste in the sea. Beginning in 2024, balloons of all types will not be permitted on public property or at city events. If used, there are fines of up to 500 dollars.

The move is part of a growing trend. Maryland and Virginia banned balloon releases in 2021. Hawaii did the same in 2022, with New York and Florida now considering similar measures. Like plastic bags and other things that cause pollution, experts say balloon bans could become more popular as awareness of the environmental harms rises.

Coastal cities are leading the way for even stricter bans on balloons like the one in Laguna Beach, says Anja Brandon, Associate Director of US Plastics Policy at the nonprofit environmental group Ocean Conservancy. Part of that is because coastal cities are experiencing the environmental effects firsthand but also paying for it, she says. “Many of these cities use taxpayers’ dollars to pay for beach clean-up, especially where tourism is important.”

The council’s actions make sense to Kara Wiggin, a doctoral researcher at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, who studies microplastics in the marine environment. Balloons create several problems for the environment: there’s the plastic itself, which can be eaten by marine mammals and sea turtles. When eaten, latex balloons are 32 times more likely to kill seabirds than hard plastic.

While manufacturers claim that some balloons are biodegradable, there are no safe balloons to release, O’Brien says, as companies add a substance that slows the process and can take decades, or longer, to break down.

Everything takes longer in the water, where it becomes part of the plastic soup that floats through the oceans, Wiggin adds. “A lot of stuff that can break down in soil can’t break down in the ocean at all.”

Strings on balloons can wrap around animals’ necks and body parts, and researchers find them inside bird stomachs. This can be deadly, especially for threatened and endangered species, such as the Guadalupe fur seal and Hawaiian monk seal.

Shiny balloons are also a big problem: they never break down, stay in the oceans for years, and their shine is even more confusing to sea animals. They also can get caught in power lines and cause power cuts or fires.

There are fewer balloons than plastic bags on the beaches, Wiggin says, but they can cause unique kinds of damage and people are less responsible with them. “People actively release balloons, but they don’t actively throw plastic bags into the ocean,” says Wiggin. “It’s a great easy answer to manage with legislation.”

It’s too early to say whether these bans are having an impact, but the Ocean Conservancy organises the International Coastal Clean-up every year and keeps data on what litter they find, so there could be more answers soon.

In thinking about what we do about balloons on a legal level, Brandon says that one of the challenges is many bills look at single-use plastic packaging – and balloons aren’t packaging, so they’re not included in that.

Although they have a different use, they have similar results: there’s no good way to eliminate them. “That’s why banning them completely is such an effective policy – especially banning their release where they could do the most harm.”

Wiggin says she likes paper decorations. While they don’t float in the air, “you can hang them from things, fold them into a little fan, and tie a little cotton string around them, and it gives the same effect.”

“Plastic pollution anywhere impacts the ocean everywhere,” says Brandon. “We only have one water cycle.”

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Are the following sentences **TRUE** or **FALSE**?
Write **TRUE** or **FALSE**.

1. A city in Florida recently banned the sale and use of balloons.
2. Two reasons for the ban are wildfire risk and waste in the sea.
3. Many coastal cities use taxpayers' money for beach clean-ups.
4. Balloons are ten times more likely to kill seabirds than hard plastic.
5. Some balloons are safe to release.
6. Stuff that can break down in soil can also break down easily in the ocean.
7. Balloon strings can also harm birds and sea animals.
8. There are more balloons than plastic bags on beaches now.
9. As an alternative, the article suggests trying paper decorations.
10. Plastic pollution in one part of the ocean only impacts that part of the ocean.



Write the correct words from the wordpool to complete the definitions below.

break down claim coastal confusing fine make sense
measure release shiny strict tourism trend

- 1 something that must be obeyed completely
2. an amount of money you must pay because you broke the law
3. the way a situation is changing or developing
4. the act of letting something go
5. an action intended to achieve a goal or deal with something
6. on land beside a sea
7. the business of providing services for people who are travelling
8. be a good or sensible thing to do
9. say something is true without proof
10. separate into smaller parts or into the parts it is made of