

Coastwatch calls for control of gas balloon releases in response to the latest mass release in Galway.

Contact Karin Dubsy 00 353 (0) 86 8111 684 - kdubsy@coastwatch.org

Someone will report finding a gas balloon further from Galway Palace Grounds than any other of the 5000 balloons released there yesterday. As this is the side of the story which feeds the balloon industry, Coastwatch is releasing this statement to urge people to inform themselves about the negatives impacts and alternatives before considering such mass balloon releases and to call on government to clarify what controls are in place in Ireland regarding the creation of this flying litter.

Karin Dubsy, Coastwatch international Coordinator said: 'Every one of those 5000 balloons on strings turned into flying litter destined to come down whole or in pieces and then pose a risk to wildlife. A cluster of strings carries an added entanglement risk. When landing on water, floating balloons resemble jellyfish which sea turtles feed on, while balloon pieces wriggle like small squid and other prey ingested by dolphins, some seabirds and seals'.

We acknowledge that the 'Care for Shane' Trust cause is worthy and undoubtedly huge work and planning went into this giant event. Unfortunately we did not know it was to take place. But as there will be more such events we must tackle the lack of information today to help them and other good causes switch to environmentally sound methods.

If a top RTE presenter like Marian Finucane doesn't know there is a wildlife risk - as she remarked on her chat show yesterday - then its high time for the subject to be aired. After examining present balloon industry information on their products and impacts we see gaping holes. For example - the word 'biodegradable' balloons does not alert you to the fact that it takes months or years to degrade and goes through a sticky phase which raises the choking risk if ingested.

Finally a call for some citizen science: as these balloons are now released let's make the most of it.

According to balloon industry research most balloons come down within 30 km of source, which with yesterday's light West winds would have kept most litter in county Galway. Did that happen? Balloons which didn't burst and drifted on, losing helium gas could have made it to the Irish Sea and beyond. If landing on the sea they drift and are windblown until they sink, or are eaten, or stranded. Coastwatch is hoping the Galway event organisers will share data to plot balloon locations and additionally invite anyone who sees a Galway Care for Shane balloon washed up or on water to notify us survey@coastwatch.org ideally with a photo, especially if it's after 6 pm tonight when the Trust competition is over. This information will help build up balloon flight data.

Note to the Editor

Coastwatch did not know about this planned release until it took place and hence could not engage with the organisers in advance, but wishes to alert others in advance and provide any help with search for environmentally sound alternatives. There are dozens of other ways to do something for a person if you have 5 euro to spend which don't put nature at risk, use up a finite helium gas needed for medicine and contribute to littering.

Coastwatch has researched this topic and presented findings to the Trinity College Dublin Green Campus committee which lead to a policy of no gas balloon releases on college campus in Feb 2016, see

https://www.tcd.ie/GreenPages/documents/Balloon_Leaflet_TCD_GreenWeek_2016.pdf