

PRESS RELEASE

August 27, 2018

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Balloon Litter is Number One Debris Item on Virginia's Remote Beaches

*New Reports from Virginia Coastal Zone Management (CZM) Program
Tackle Balloon Litter in Virginia*

Two new reports by the Virginia Coastal Zone Management (CZM) Program at the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and Clean Virginia Waterways of Longwood University, focus on the dangerous effects of balloon litter, and a study of balloon release behavior. As part of a five-year study on balloon litter in coastal environments in the Commonwealth, researchers found more than 11,400 balloon-related items on Virginia's beaches.

These studies, both funded by the Virginia CZM Program through grants from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, represent the most extensive long-term research project focused on balloon-related litter, its impacts and related solutions. Balloon debris is of special concern because of its potentially severe impact on seabirds, sea turtles and marine mammals.

One report, [*Balloon Litter on Virginia's Remote Beaches*](#) documents balloons as the most abundant type of waste on five remote beaches surveyed between 2013 and 2017. Balloons and their attached plastic clips and ribbons made up 40 percent of all debris recorded, followed by plastic bottles and fishing gear. The amount of balloon litter varied from 25 items per mile on Cedar Island in Accomack County, to more than 272 items per mile at Fisherman Island National Wildlife Refuge in Northampton County.

"Deflated balloons, or pieces of balloons, look like food to some animals and plastic ribbons can cause entanglement," said Kathy O'Hara, one of the report's co-authors, and responder with the Virginia Aquarium's Stranding Response Program.

"What is incredible is the vast distances released balloons can travel," said Christina Trapani, co-author of the study. "In February, a latex balloon with a logo from Kansas was found in Hampton, Va. If actually released in Kansas, this balloon traveled almost 1,400 miles."

"Balloons are unique among all the man-made debris found in the ocean and on the land," said Virginia Witmer, co-author of the report, [*Balloon Release Research in Virginia & Reducing Balloon Debris through Community-Based Social Marketing*](#). "Helium-filled balloons are the one form of litter that people may be purchasing with the intent to release into the environment."

Interviews and surveys revealed that many people don't understand that there is no such thing as an environmentally-friendly released balloon.

"This partnership of scientists, educators and government agencies, has provided us with tremendous knowledge about balloon litter in Virginia that informs the steps we need to take to

reduce balloon releases at both happy and sad occasions,” said Laura McKay, CZM Program Manager at DEQ.

Partners used this research to launch “*Joyful Send-off*,” a campaign to encourage litter-free alternatives to balloon releases at weddings and other celebrations. Virginia’s ongoing research is being shared with other Mid-Atlantic states to raise awareness.

“None of us are anti-balloon,” said Katie Register, Executive Director of Clean Virginia Waterways and co-author of the balloon release behavior study. “Celebrating with balloons is fun – but at the end of the celebration, we need to pop them and drop them in the trash. There are other ways to celebrate and make lasting memories without harming wildlife,” she added.

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The two reports can be downloaded from -

<https://www.deq.virginia.gov/Programs/CoastalZoneManagement/CZMIssuesInitiatives/MarineDebris/MarineDebris-Balloons.aspx>

and

<http://www.longwood.edu/cleanva/OurWorkBalloonLitter.html>