

Preventing Harmful Balloon Debris Along New York's Marine Coast

Through both removal and outreach programming, New York Sea Grant (NYSG) is addressing the issue of harmful marine debris, specifically balloon pollution, which is often the result of intentional releases by people who do not connect their actions to the debris problem.

Balloon releases are seldom associated with littering, but all released balloons eventually come down. Balloons and their remnants pose an extreme risk to marine animals, which can mistake them for food and ingest them, or become entangled in ribbons and attachments.

To address this issue, marine debris specialists from New York to Virginia are collaborating to assess the quantity of balloon debris in the Mid-Atlantic coastal region and how and if that quantity may be impacted by outreach efforts. To assess the state of the problem in New York, baseline debris data is being collected through surveys and cleanup events. Balloons are a known problem in the Mid-Atlantic states, where 18,737 volunteers recorded more than 8,400 pieces of balloon litter during the 2016 International Coastal Cleanup.

In 2018, NYSG helped lead and oversee New York's beach cleanup and balloon survey on Jones Beach in Nassau County. About 25 high school students from Kennedy High School and an additional eight volunteers from the local area and environmental organizations assisted in these tasks, learning about the topic of marine debris in the process. Over six hours, the effort covered one mile of beach, removing 2,041 pieces of debris, including 309 balloon items. These baseline numbers will be used with future data to assess the effectiveness of the project's outreach efforts.

This project applies various outreach approaches. One area of attention is the acceptable social norms associated with intentional balloon releases. To begin to create change in these behaviors, particular focus is being placed on wedding venues, using educational outreach to encourage the use of alternative options to celebratory balloon releases.



*High school students record debris items and mark balloon debris for data collection on Jones Beach in Nassau County, N.Y.
Photo: NYSG/Krista Stegemann*

This Balloon Debris Reduction Project is cleaning up New York's coastline, collecting valuable data, and educating those that may unintentionally create balloon litter. This effort is focused on changing detrimental behavior and social norms in order to protect the marine environment and foster environmental stewardship.

Partners:

- MARCO: Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean
- New York State Department of Environmental Conservation
- New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
- NOAA Marine Debris Program (funding)
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

The Sea Grant Focus Area for this project is Healthy New York Coastal Ecosystems & Habitats

New York Sea Grant is a joint program of Cornell University, the State University of New York, and NOAA.

New York Sea Grant Extension,
112 Rice Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853

*This project summary was written by Ocean & Marine Outreach
Coordinator Krista Stegemann, 631-632-8730,
ks2336@cornell.edu, www.nyseagrant.org*