

New York Sea Grant and Mid-Atlantic partners have united to reduce intentional balloon debris, one of the most prevalent and damaging “acceptable” forms of coastal littering

NYSG & Mid-Atlantic Partners: Preventing Balloon Debris

Marine debris is a global issue that can threaten wildlife, habitats, and people. Unfortunately, while not intended to pollute, some debris is intentionally released into our environment. For instance, balloons are frequently released for celebratory or other reasons — often by people who would otherwise never “litter”. As a consequence, balloon debris is found in alarming quantity on New York’s shores and can cause considerable damage due to its resemblance to food for marine animals and entanglement risk.

To address balloon debris, New York Sea Grant is working with several partners to target this serious issue throughout the Mid-Atlantic region. This project, led by the Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean and funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, addresses balloon debris through removal, data collection, and outreach programming designed to encourage people to refrain from releasing balloons and opt for more environmentally-friendly alternatives.

Data collection and removal efforts are well underway. In New York in 2019, this has included two balloon debris survey and beach cleanup events during which volunteers collected valuable data while cleaning the most western mile of Jones Beach. More than 50 students, teachers, professionals, and community members removed 3,500-plus pieces of marine debris from the shore, including more than 400 pieces of balloon-related debris. Although collection numbers varied based on cleanup date and factors such as recent storms, the basic ratio of balloon-related items (~10-20%) to general debris (~80-90%) remained the same over three events, indicating the need for public education aimed at preventing the release of balloons. The outreach portion of this project is currently in development.

As more information is gathered through regular surveys, the clearer our picture of the extent of balloon debris in NY will become. The next survey for this project is scheduled for March 28, 2020.



A team of volunteers records valuable data on balloon debris found on Jones Beach in March 2019 as part of a project to prevent such debris in the NY-Mid-Atlantic region. The next survey is scheduled for March 2020. Photo: Ryan Strother, NYSG

Through removal, data collection, and outreach, New York Sea Grant is working with partners to clean New York and Mid-Atlantic beaches of balloon debris as well as to educate and engage communities to prevent future balloon debris from polluting our shores.

Project Partners:

Mid-Atlantic Regional Council on the Ocean (project lead)
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
Marine Debris Program (funding)
New York State Department of Environmental Conservation
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

The Sea Grant Focus Area for this project is Healthy Coastal Ecosystems.

New York Sea Grant is a joint program of Cornell University, the State University of New York, and NOAA.
Contact: New York Sea Grant Extension, 112 Rice Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853; www.nyseagrant.org.

Project summary was written by Ocean & Marine Outreach Coordinator Krista Stegemann Haas, 631-632-8730, ks2336@cornell.edu.