

## US beach town bans balloons to save the ocean

Level 3: Advanced

### 1 Warmer

a. Do you use balloons to decorate for holidays or celebrations? Make a list in the first column. Then ask three classmates whether they use balloons for that type of occasion. Tick (✓) if they do.

Holiday or special occasion	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3

b. In groups, come up with some ideas of decorations you can use instead of balloons. Discuss as a class.

### 2 Key words

a. Write the correct words from the wordpool to complete the definitions below. Then find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.

biodegradable
catch on
comprehensive
debris
exterior

intentional
legislation
marine
metallic
obstruction

persisting
residential
starvation
tangled
violators

1. living or happening in the sea and the creatures that live in it \_\_\_\_\_
2. people who break laws, agreements, or principles \_\_\_\_\_
3. describes an area in which most of the buildings are houses \_\_\_\_\_
4. deliberate, on purpose \_\_\_\_\_
5. become popular or fashionable \_\_\_\_\_
6. the broken pieces that are left when something has been destroyed, especially by fire, explosion, or other accident \_\_\_\_\_
7. something that blocks a path, passage, door, etc., so that it is difficult or impossible to move along or through it \_\_\_\_\_
8. a situation in which people or animals die because they do not have enough to eat \_\_\_\_\_



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9. substances that can be broken into tiny parts by bacteria, so they are not harmful to the environment \_\_\_\_\_
10. consisting of or containing metal \_\_\_\_\_
11. continue to exist \_\_\_\_\_
12. the outside part of something, especially a building \_\_\_\_\_
13. when the parts of something are twisted around each other in an untidy way \_\_\_\_\_
14. a law or set of statutes \_\_\_\_\_
15. including many details or aspects of something \_\_\_\_\_

**b. Use some of the key words above to complete these sentences.**

1. You must only put \_\_\_\_\_ waste in the compost bin.
2. The building is still under construction, so neither the interior nor the \_\_\_\_\_ is complete yet.
3. Environmental groups are asking for \_\_\_\_\_ change to protect more of the land, air, and water.
4. That cough you have is \_\_\_\_\_. I think it's time to see a doctor.
5. I forgot my hat, so after the boat ride, my hair was a \_\_\_\_\_ mess.
6. I don't think you'll find many shops here – this is a \_\_\_\_\_ area.
7. It's fascinating how some slang words \_\_\_\_\_ and become popular, but others don't.
8. When animals face habitat loss, they often face \_\_\_\_\_ too.
9. I know what she said hurt your feelings, but are you sure it was \_\_\_\_\_?
10. After the plane crash, the \_\_\_\_\_ was cleared away very quickly.

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***Experts say more cities should join the growing legislative trend to reduce waste, save birds and protect against wildfires.***

**Katharine Gammon**

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- 1 Laguna Beach – the California city known for surfers, waves, and rolling hills – has grabbed headlines for enacting a strict ban on the sale and use of balloons. The city council passed the resolution, citing wildfire risk and the fact that balloons are a huge source of marine waste. Beginning in 2024, balloons of all types will not be permitted on public property or at city events, with violators facing fines of up to 500 dollars. Residential homes will be exempt.
- 2 The move is part of a growing trend. Maryland and Virginia banned intentional balloon releases in 2021. Hawaii followed suit 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 catch on more widely as awareness of the environmental harms rises.
- 3 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 non-profit environmental group Ocean Conservancy. Part of that is because coastal cities are experiencing the environmental effects first-hand 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.”
- 4 The council’s actions make a lot of sense to Kara Wiggin, a doctoral researcher at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, who studies microplastics in the marine environment. Balloons have a double hazard 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, making them the deadliest type of marine debris for seabirds. Lara O’Brien, a contractor with NOAA’s Office for Coastal Management, says this causes problems in the birds’ stomachs, including “obstruction, starvation and death”.
- 5 While manufacturers claim that some latex balloons are biodegradable, there are no safe balloons to release, O’Brien says, as they have added a substance that slows the biodegradation process and can take decades, or longer, to break down.
- 6 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 – so even if something says it’s biodegradable, it might not be marine biodegradable.”
- 7 There’s also a string attached to balloons, which can be even more damaging. Strings can wrap around necks and body parts, and researchers find them inside bird stomachs, which can be deadly and devastating, especially for threatened and endangered species, such as the Guadalupe fur seal and Hawaiian monk seal, both of which suffer from dangerously high levels of entanglement in the wild,” says Adam Ratner, Associate Director of Conservation Education at the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito, California.
- 8 Mylar balloons – made from nylon with a metallic coating – are also a big problem: they never break down, persisting in the oceans for years, and their shiny exterior is even more confusing to sea animals. They also can get tangled in power lines and cause power cuts or fires.
- 9 There are fewer balloons than plastic bags on the beaches, Wiggin says, but they’re uniquely damaging, and people are less responsible with them.
- 10 “People actively release balloons, but they don’t actively toss plastic bags into the ocean,” says Wiggin. “So that’s a good low-hanging fruit, especially in Laguna Beach, where the parks are along the water. It’s a great easy answer to manage with legislation.”
- 11 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 comprehensive bills may not necessarily be geared towards balloons in particular. “One of the challenges

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is a lot of those bills look at single-use plastic packaging – and balloons are this outside monster, separate from the packaging debate,” she says.

- 12 Although they have a different use, they have similar outcomes: there’s no good end-of-life plan for them. “That’s why banning them completely is such an effective policy – especially banning the release of them where they could do the most harm.”
- 13 Wiggin says she likes tissue-paper decorations. While they don’t float in the air, “you can kind of hang them from things, fold them into a little fan and tie a little cotton string around it, and it gives the same effect.”
- 14 “Plastic pollution anywhere impacts the ocean everywhere,” says Brandon. “We only have one water cycle.”

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#### 3 Comprehension check

a. Are these statements True (T) or False (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. A city in Florida recently banned the sale and use of balloons.
2. Two reasons for the ban are wildfire risk and marine waste.
3. Many coastal cities use taxpayers' money to pay for beach clean-ups.
4. Latex balloons are ten times more likely to kill seabirds than hard plastic.
5. Biodegradable balloons are the only safe balloons to release.
6. Even if something says it's biodegradable, it may not be *marine* biodegradable.
7. Balloon strings can also harm birds and sea animals.
8. There are more balloons than plastic bags on beaches now.
9. The data already shows that these bans are having an impact.
10. Balloons are not usually included in single-use plastic and plastic packaging bans.
11. As an alternative, the article suggests trying tissue-paper decorations.
12. Plastic pollution in one part of the ocean only impacts that particular part of the ocean.

#### 4 Key language

a. Combine the two sentences into one using a relative clause with *who*, *which* or *that*. Use the article to help you.

1. Kara Wiggin is a doctoral researcher. She studies microplastics in the marine environment.
2. There's the plastic itself. Marine mammals and sea turtles can eat plastic.
3. Manufacturers make claims about latex balloons. Some latex balloons are biodegradable.
4. They have added a substance. The substance slows the biodegradation process.
5. It becomes part of the plastic soup. The plastic soup floats through the oceans.
6. A lot of stuff can break down in the soil. A lot of stuff can't break down in the ocean at all.
7. There's also a string attached to balloons. The string can be even more damaging.
8. Strings can wrap around necks and body parts. Strings can be deadly and devastating.

b. Write four sentences with relative clauses about an environmental issue in your area.

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#### 5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “Banning balloons isn’t worth it because there aren’t that many causing pollution.”
- “All single-use plastics should be banned to force us to use other materials.”
- “We need to improve how biodegradable things are in water.”

#### 6 In your own words

a. Imagine you are part of a research team studying the effects of plastic on marine plants and animals. What questions do you have? What area of research would you focus on? Use an internet search engine to find more information about current research areas and what your research question(s) would add to this.

b. Report your findings to the class and share your opinion about the issue. Here are some phrases to help you.

*... is an essential component of ...*

*... is an increasingly important issue in ...*

*Recent developments in ... have shown the need for ...*

*To date, there has been little agreement on ...*

*The controversy over ... has gone on for many years.*

*The issue of ... has recently grown in importance.*

*Until now, little importance has been placed on ...*

*Numerous studies have argued that ...*

*Several studies have revealed ...*

*The research to date has tended to focus on ...*

*Data from several studies has identified ...*

*It has been suggested that ...*

*The data indicate that ...*

*Other studies have considered the relationship between ...*

*This view is supported by ..., who argues that ...*

*Previous studies have only focused on ...*

*A fundamental problem with this argument is ...*

*One question that needs to be asked, however, is ...*

*More research is needed to understand better...*