



Soroptimist International is a vibrant, dynamic organisation for today's professional and business women. We are committed to a world where women and girls together achieve their individual and collective potential, realise aspirations and have an equal voice in creating strong and peaceful communities world-wide.

Soroptimists inspire action and create opportunities to transform the lives of women and girls through a global network of members and international partnerships.

Soroptimists will ensure that women and girls:

- Enjoy equity and equality
- Live in safe and healthy environments
- Have access to education
- Have leadership and practical skills.

<http://soroptimist-gbi.org>



Soroptimist International Bilston & District ( West Midlands) was established in 1943 and currently has 41 members. The work of programme action is central to the club's activities.

[www.soroptimist-gbi.co.uk/bilston-and-district](http://www.soroptimist-gbi.co.uk/bilston-and-district)

This report is written by club members and is the result of work over several years.

## SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL BILSTON & DISTRICT



# "PLEASE DON'T LET GO"

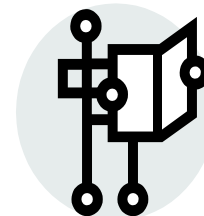
This report summarises actions taken by

**Soroptimist International Bilston & District**

whose members became increasingly concerned about the damage to the environment and the death of wildlife caused by balloon debris.

**'Balloons float up into the air and disappear from your thoughts, but not from the environment'.**

(Courtesy of Marine Conservation Society)



BALLOON

PROJECT 2011



## BACKGROUND

On the cover of a Soroptimist International publication there was a photograph of a club releasing balloons to highlight a Soroptimist project. Bilston club members were alarmed at the possible impact on the environment, particularly if this practice is widespread, and so decided to take action.

The starting point was to seek information on research already carried out by the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) and to use their data as a basis for the production of an SI Bilston & District leaflet stating aims, concerns, actions and to include good practice. This highlights

concerns about the impact of balloon debris on the environment and encourages safe use of balloons.

(copy of the leaflet is available on

[www.soroptimist-gbi.co.uk/bilston-and-district](http://www.soroptimist-gbi.co.uk/bilston-and-district) )



## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. This report will be used to lobby members of Parliament to achieve legislative change to the Environmental Protection Act 1990.
2. Copies to be forwarded to local MPs .
3. A report to be sent to the Minister for the Environment.
4. A report to be sent to HRH Prince Charles.
5. These findings to be sent to Marine Conservation Society to supplement their research.
6. A copy of the report to be sent to all interested parties including Campaign to Protect Rural England for the attention of Bill Bryson and Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales.
7. A report be forwarded to Soroptimist Assistant Programme Director for the Environment and the chair of the Programme Action Chair with a copy to Midland Chase Region Clubs for information.
8. Send copies to other appropriate organisations.
9. Continue to challenge mass balloon releases.



## OUTCOMES

- ◇ Awareness has been raised with local authorities who do not already have policy and procedures in place.
- ◇ SIGBI has agreed to place a health warning on balloons sold to promote the organisation.
- ◇ Proof now exists that balloons do not degrade in 6 months which can be used to challenge the research:

*“Based on the results through the first six weeks of aging the following conclusion[s] can be made:.. ...Latex rubber balloons degrade about as fast as oak tree leaves under a wide range of exposure conditions in the environment including sunlight, weathering, soil and water exposures.” D.K.Bourchette 1989*

- ◇ Several organisations /authorities offer alternative use of balloons which are included in the S.I. Bilston leaflet eg. car balloons, balloon lottery, balloon raffle.
- ◇ Intervention by club members has potentially influenced future practice in the following companies/ organisations:
  - Lakeland – Creative Kitchenware
  - Interflora
  - Local schools.
- ◇ The extent of interested parties has been widened via Soroptimist International social network sites.
- ◇ The MCS petition to persuade Government to class balloon debris as litter in Environmental Protection Act 1990 was signed by a 175 Soroptimist conference delegates.



## PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT.

**To persuade central government to include balloon debris as litter in Environment Protection Act 1990.**

It was necessary to gather evidence to support the well founded theory that balloon debris damages the environment and can kill wildlife.

In order to achieve this aim the following objectives were agreed:

- To make contact with local authorities to ascertain whether they had policy and procedures in place regarding the mass release of balloons on their land.
- To contact universities with marine departments to ascertain the outcome of their research into balloon degradability.
- To collate relevant information from other interested parties to support the campaign.
- To persuade Soroptimist International Great Britain & Ireland (SIGBI) to use health warning on all balloons sold ie to dispose of balloons safely and not engage in mass balloon releases.



## ACTION TAKEN

Initially the project focussed on seeking evidence including Fact Sheets, from the following :

- Marine Conservation Society (MCS)
- Local authorities
- University Marine Biology Departments
- National Farmers' Union (NFU)
- Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)
- Keep Wales Tidy
- Keep Scotland Beautiful
- Keep Britain Tidy

This then formed the basis of an SI Bilston & District leaflet and flyer for circulation amongst 2000 Conference delegates within Soroptimist International Great Britain & Ireland.

Soroptimist International has an on line global data base on which SI Bilston recorded its project. As a result of this the club was approached by other clubs for information to influence their local councils to ban mass balloon releases.

Good practice was identified within Barclays Bank where following a review (2005) of the impact of balloon releases on wildlife and the environment, it was agreed that no match

funding would be given to fundraising activities using balloons.



- ⇒ There are two types of balloon, latex and foil. The first is natural rubber and will biodegrade over a number of years but it is unknown how long it takes for the foil material to break down and that may never happen.
- ⇒ A percentage of balloons do not burst in the atmosphere and can travel long distances.
- ⇒ Balloons can be filled with air or helium. MCS recommends that balloons are always air filled as helium is lighter than air and can go as far as space. Helium gas is a non renewable, precious gas which is depleting at an alarming rate.
- ⇒ In addition to balloon debris the attached strings and labels are known to entangle animals and even garden birds. (see page 7). The plastic valves used in mass balloon releases will never biodegrade and are themselves a real threat to wildlife.
- ⇒ Balloon debris is known to be mistaken by animals and marine life as food and can cause choking leading to starvation .

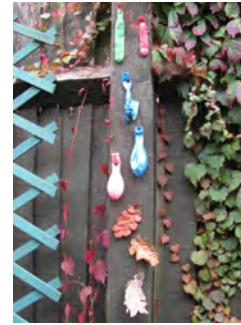
*Marine Conservation Society guidelines for wildlife friendly balloon use include:*

- ◆ *Don't let go of balloons outdoors*
- ◆ *Fill balloons with air rather than helium*
- ◆ *Use balloons made of natural rubber latex rather than foil balloons*
- ◆ *Tie balloons with natural cotton string rather than plastic ribbon*
- ◆ *Securely tie any balloons that are used outside*
- ◆ *Always hand tie balloons rather than using plastic valves.*



## WHAT WAS FOUND.

- ⇒ There is much evidence to support the fact that balloon debris kills wildlife and damages the environment. (photo © Christine McGuinness, MCS)
- ⇒ Not all local authorities have adopted policy and procedures regarding mass balloon releases. A small percentage of local authorities have produced excellent policies and guidelines. (eg Plymouth & Oxford City).
- ⇒ A number of local authorities without policies in place expressed interest and willingness to review their own practice. Some had not even considered balloon debris to be a problem.
- ⇒ Investigations reveal that there is a general lack of awareness and understanding amongst the public, but individuals became engaged with the subject when the facts about balloon debris were shared.
- ⇒ Research showed that Sainsburys, Norwich Union, TGI Friday and Marks & Spencer have banned balloon releases in their charitable activities.
- ⇒ Although it is suggested that balloons and oak leaves are degradable, the evidence obtained through the balloon cemetery shows that even after 18 months this is not the case.



A balloon 'cemetery' was established in August 2009 in the garden of a member to dispel the myth that balloons would degrade at the same pace as an oak leaf i.e. 6 months. Various types of balloon were buried, placed on top of the ground and hung on a garden fence along with oak leaves.

Soroptimist members followed up and challenged items in the local press about balloon releases. For example, it was brought to the attention of the manager of a Sainsburys' store that he had failed to acknowledge company policy by allowing a charity, the store was supporting, to engage in a mass balloon release.

Further challenges were issued to companies such as Lakeland Kitchen who sell Space Balloons and Interflora who attach helium filled balloons to age related floral bouquets. Both companies agreed to review practice.

As part of the publicity and enquiry, links were made with interested parties including Girl Guiding and London Olympics Committee. The latter stated that there would be no balloon releases associated with 2012 Olympic Games.

Written responses were sent to the national press relating to articles concerning balloon releases of all types.

An article about the project was published in the Soroptimist News in March 2010.



**Balloon Cemetery**  
AFTER 18 MONTHS





## Balloon kills cow

A farmer won compensation after a Red Nose Day balloon released by pupils in London to support Comic Relief killed his cow. One balloon landed in Kent and Richard Vant's 13-month-old bullock choked to death on its string. The school's insurer paid out £889.

## Balloon post

SIR – Over the weekend, we celebrated a family double birthday. I bought some helium-filled foil balloons and, as a final celebratory act, we tied two together with a label containing our contact details and a request that should anyone find them, please let us know. They were launched into a brisk easterly breeze. Three hours later we received a call to report they had been found in a village just north of Fakenham in Norfolk – 100 miles away.

I am intrigued by how they might have met their demise, as I was told they would have retained the gas for up to a fortnight. If they gained a certain height would they have burst, or was it a seagull attack?

David Hartridge  
Groby, Leicestershire

## Bombarded cows

SIR – My husband and I, Wirral dairy farmers, are very concerned about the craze for releasing airborne illuminated “Chinese lanterns” at wedding receptions and parties. No thought is given, apparently, to where they will land.

In May, 57 appeared, scattered over our farm, and last weekend more landed. Should they remain undetected, they could easily get chopped and end up in silage for our pedigree dairy cows. The wire element of the lanterns could prove fatal if eaten by cattle.

This must be happening all over the country and should be stopped.

Ruth Pidsley  
Ledsham, Wirral



**A READER asks: “If you inflated a balloon in the high street, pricked it with a pin and dropped it, you’d be nicked for littering. So why do so many civic and showbiz celebrations start with the release of thousands of balloons, and no-one gives a damn?”**

## YES -Car Balloons



## Farmers appeal for ban on ‘dangerous’ Chinese sky lanterns

□ The National Farmers’ Union has written to the Government in its attempts to have Chinese sky lanterns banned.

The paper lanterns, which are lifted by hot air from a candle inside them, have become increasingly popular in the past year, with thousands released at weddings and parties. But the union claimed that the lanterns, which can drift for several miles, posed a serious risk to animals.

“They are clearly very dangerous to livestock and pose a fire risk and we are raising our concerns with the Government,” said a spokesman.

He said the union had received

“dozens” of complaints from its members about Chinese lanterns.

A cow died from eating a piece of a lantern’s wire frame, which ruptured its stomach, and a foal had to be put down after it injured itself on a fence because it was startled by two lights that landed in its field.

Marc Cooper, a senior scientific officer with the RSPCA, described the lanterns as a “serious risk to cattle”.

“Consumers should be made aware of the potential risk to animals,” he said.

Arable farmers have raised concerns that the lights could set fire to fields of crops or dry hay.

## Killer balloons

SIR – Ruth Pidsley (Letters, July 6) wrote of the danger to her farm’s cattle, arising from Chinese lanterns released into the air to float and land without thought of the consequences.

Wildlife is also threatened by the mass release of balloons in the name of sponsored charitable causes. These can be ingested with devastating effects by all manner of marine and land creatures.

Quite apart from the damage to wildlife, the practice amounts to scattering litter and should be regarded as such.

Robert Bryant  
Bromley, Kent



© Christine McGuinness (MCS)

## Swift action shows that balloon ‘Don’t Let Go’ campaign is vital

The Marine Conservation Society (MCS) says a swift that fell to earth entangled in a spent balloon and its string, clearly shows the dangers of mass releases seen at many outdoor events during the summer.

The swift plummeted to the ground in the garden of Fran Crowe, an artist based in Sudbourne in Suffolk. Ironically, Fran is a supporter of MCS and its campaign ‘Don’t Let Go’, which encourages people not to allow balloons to float away either individually or *en masse*.

