**How many balloons end up in the Long Island Sound each year? Experts discuss the decoration's impact on marine life**

By [Abby Weiss](https://www.ctinsider.com/author/abby-weiss/),

Staff writer

May 31, 2024

[Graduation](https://www.ctinsider.com/connecticut/article/ct-prison-students-graduation-ceremony-yale-unh-19463597.php) season and the [start of summer](https://www.ctinsider.com/weather/article/ct-summer-forecast-2024-19472056.php) mark the time of year when people take their [celebrations outside](https://www.ctinsider.com/journalinquirer/article/ct-manchester-celebrate-event-19481385.php). For Bill Lucey, this period means he'll be fishing more [balloons](https://www.ctinsider.com/fairfield/article/pop-studio-balloons-fairfield-18296561.php) out of the [Long Island Sound](https://www.ctinsider.com/health/article/ct-study-microplastic-hotspots-long-island-sound-19417705.php).

Since 2017, Lucey has served as the [Long Island Soundkeeper](https://www.savethesound.org/what-we-do/healthy-waters/long-island-soundkeeper/), monitoring and advocating for the body of water. During the summertime, he rides his boat out three to four times a week and often finds balloons saying "Happy Graduation" or "Happy Birthday." While he finds balloons floating in the water year-round, he notices a significant increase around late spring and early summer.

“Around holiday events, especially graduation, that when people see more of them. Sometimes they'll see a whole cluster of balloons together floating out there, like a bunch of grapes," he said.

Every year, volunteers from the nonprofit Save the Sound recover over 400 Mylar and rubber balloons from the Long Island Sound watershed in Connecticut, according to the organization's [Connecticut Cleanup Report](https://www.savethesound.org/what-we-do/healthy-waters/cleanups-and-marine-debris/), which summarized six years of trash data. On a larger scale, The [Ocean Conservancy](https://oceanconservancy.org/)'s 2019 International Coastal Cleanup collected over 100,000 balloons internationally, with more than half of those found in the United States.

Lucey — who collects anywhere from 50-100 balloons from the Sound a year — believes the amount of balloons that end up in the Long Island Sound is undercounted, as the Save the Sound data doesn’t account for all locations on the shoreline nor the debris that ends up in the water.

“I probably talked to 50 different sailors and recreational boaters, and no one likes them because they can get tangled in the prop and get sucked up into your intake. So I'm sure there are thousands, if not tens of thousands, that hit the water every year," he said.

The most common types of balloons he sees are Mylar, which are created from plastic nylon sheets with metal coating, which can cause an outage or fire when hitting a power line. In the ocean, these non-biodegradable balloons break down into smaller pieces and create micro plastics. The standard latex balloon is biodegradable but takes several months to break down, and it can still leave its strings attached.

Animals can ingest the plastics breaking down from balloons and experience blockages in their digestive systems, Danielle Kamberalis, the East Coast Marine Debris Specialist at [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Marine Debris Program](https://marinedebris.noaa.gov/who-we-are/contact-us), said.

Marine animals can also become entangled in the durable long-lasting balloon strings, she said.

“It could wrap around their bodies or their necks and make swimming or breathing difficult," she said. "Especially as animals grow, it becomes even more of a threat to them."

Connecticut policymakers have introduced legislation to reduce the amount of balloon pollution in the state. In 2022, legislation was adopted to prohibit the [release of 10 or more](https://www.cga.ct.gov/2022/rpt/pdf/2022-R-0041.pdf) lighter-than-air balloons (ones that float into the air) in Connecticut.

Earlier this year, State Rep. Joe Gresko, D-Stratford and Sen. Rick Lopes, D-New Britain[introduced a bill](https://www.ctinsider.com/politics/article/ct-bill-balloons-biodegradable-5-years-18693422.php) that would eventually ban the sale of non-biodegradable balloons in the state.

In his [testimony for the bill](https://www.cga.ct.gov/2024/envdata/TMY/2024SB-00291-R000308-Lucey%2C%20William%2C%20Long%20Island%20Soundkeeper-Save%20the%20Sound-Supports-TMY.PDF), Lucey showed a picture given to him by a commercial fisherman and his wife of a lobster completely bound up in a balloon string. The animal was discovered in a lobster trapoff North Fork, Long Island, he said.

Though the [legislation](https://www.cga.ct.gov/2024/TOB/S/PDF/2024SB-00291-R00-SB.PDF) didn't pass, he’s optimistic that the state will eventually transition to using biodegradable balloons in the coming years. He hopes to work with legislators and businesses that sell non-biodegradable balloons on creating a plausible plan.

Kamberalis said the most effective way to reduce balloon pollution is to prevent them from being released into the air in the first place. Biodegradable balloons need to land in certain environmental conditions to break down and take a while to do so, she said.

"Even if a material is biodegradable, that doesn't always mean that it is returning to nature in the way that it's intended,” she said.

Effective methods that the public can utilize include calling off intentional releases, using fewer balloons for celebrations and making sure balloon trash is contained in covered waste bins so they don't fall out during storms.

While balloons are a festive addition to celebrations, she encourages the public to think about reusable decorations such as candles or lights. Some event organizers are transitioning away from balloon releases and fireworks to putting on laser light shows, she said.

“There are alternatives out there," she said. "Behavior change is tough and slow, but if you get a little creative, there are some really fun ways to avoid  pollution from balloons."

Kamberalis also encourages people to be mindful of their marine debris output, whichshe said has increased nationwide since the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2023, through the beach clean ups, Save the Sound collected 12,000 cigarette butts, 8000 food wrappers and 4,000 plastic bottle caps from Connecticut waterways.

The [Connecticut and New York Sea Grant programs](https://seagrant.uconn.edu/marine-debris-action-plan-lis/) developed a five-year plan in 2022, with funds from the NOAA Marine Debris Program and NOAA National Sea Grant, to clean up balloons and other debris in the Sound. Nancy Balcom, associate director for the Connecticut Sea Grant College Program at the University of Connecticut and co-leader of the Long Island Sound Marine Debris Action Plan, said the plan is an ongoing effort and there may be an opportunity to renew it for another five years.

One of the steps of the plan is to educate the public about the impacts of marine debris, like balloons.

“It's about intentional release. I understand why people want to release balloons. They're celebrating, or they're trying to remember somebody. It's a very visual means for expressing some kind of emotion," she said. "We're hoping some of our partners will step up and talk about why it's good not to intentionally release balloons."