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Environmental impact of balloon release

Stellenbosch University (SU)

The potential environmental impact of the release of the some 5 000 balloons was raised in the planning phase of the Dream Launch. According Ms Daniella Potgieter, MAD^2 convenor, the impact of the balloon release was researched beforehand and precautions were taken to ensure it would be a safe event complying with relevant standards.

The event in question – billed a "Dream Launch" – formed part of the University's 2015 Welcoming Programme. It took place at the Coetzenburg Sports Grounds at around 19:00 on 22 January. A similar event took place on 23 January 2014. New students were each given a helium filled balloon on which to write down their hopes and aspirations for the future. They could then symbolically "give flight" to their dreams by releasing the balloons into the air.

The "Dream Launch" also served to kick-start SU's annual MAD^2 programme, the local version of "Rag" or "*Jool*". MAD^2 stands for "Making A Decision 2 Make A Difference" – a fun, student-driven fundraising project by SU's Students' Representative Council (SRC) in aid of Matie Community Service (MCS).

According Ms Daniella Potgieter, MAD^2 convenor, the impact of the balloon release was researched beforehand and precautions were taken to ensure it would be a safe event complying with relevant standards.

International codes of conduct for balloon releases were consulted by the organisers of the event in the interest of safeguarding animals and the environment. Accordingly, the following steps were taken:

- Only balloons made from latex rubber – a natural, biodegradable material – were used.
- Balloons were limited to 30 cm in size to minimise any possible environmental impact.
- Balloons were fully inflated with helium so that they would rise to a high altitude and burst into shreds, which shortens decomposition time.
- Balloons were hand knotted, with ribbons attached only for easy handling – and students were requested to remove these before release. Unfortunately a handful of the balloons 'escaped' before the ribbons could be removed.
- Balloons were not tied together, but released individually.

The MAD^2 organisers based their decision on two different studies. A 2013 study by ADAS, a UK-based environmental consultancy involved in research for the English and Welsh authorities, highlighted the "perceived risk to animal welfare through ingestion of debris,

litter in the countryside, the sea and on the coastline" associated with helium balloons, yet found the "current evidence indicates that the impact is very small and confined to only isolated incidents".

One reason could be that most helium filled balloons "burst into tiny pieces about 5 miles (8 km) above the ground," as indicated in a US-based study by DK Burchette in 1989. This researcher also concluded that the small percentage that do not rise high enough come down at less than one balloon per 39 km^2. And in field tests it was found that latex rubber balloons show "significant degradation after 6 weeks of exposure" in the environment – "at about the same rate as oak tree leaves".

None the less, public concerns over animals potentially choking on balloon debris or getting entangled in pieces of string seem to continue – which is why SU is relieved that no cases of harm resulting from its balloon releases the past two years have been reported.

Sustainability is one of our key focus areas at Stellenbosch University, and the institution has been making good progress in this regard, *inter alia* with respect to our mobility plan which is aimed at reducing the number of vehicles on campus and in the town though the Matie bicycle project and promoting public transport. The University is working towards a core campus with only pedestrian and bicycle traffic. Facilities Management staff mainly use battery-operated vehicles for maintenance on campus. Other initiatives include 'green' buildings, recycling and concerted electricity-saving measures.

According to Prof Leopoldt van Huyssteen, acting Rector and Vice-Chancellor, the University is continually re-evaluating the impact of its actions, as it has undertaken to be sensitive to the ecological footprint of its activities, including transport, waste, water and electricity.

"More information on our integrated sustainability policy and our initiatives is available at www.sun.ac.za/sustainability. As a public institution we also value public opinion on important matters. I have therefore asked the relevant role-players on campus to discuss this matter, and to consider other possible formats for this developing first-year tradition," Prof Van Huyssteen said.

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