



Sky lanterns: the case for a ban

Key facts:

- Sky lanterns have become increasingly common, often let off at celebration or commemoration events.
- They essentially function in the same way as a hot air balloon, they have a candle or fuel cell which heats hot air filling the body of the lantern and causes it to rise/float.
- Once released they can fly for miles before the fuel burns out and they fall to the ground.
- Sky lanterns pose a threat for several reasons, they are a danger to animals, a fire risk, an aviation hazard, and a litter nuisance.
- A number of organisations now campaign against the release of sky lanterns for these reasons.

The law

There is no international approach on sky lanterns, countries have varying legislation depending on the perceived risk. There are several countries who have implemented total bans nationwide, for example: Spain, Brazil, Germany, Chile, and Austria. Other countries control the release by districts, states, or areas. America has banned sky lantern releases in up to 30 states, and other countries such as New Zealand implement local bans in certain areas which may be particularly vulnerable to wildfires.

In the UK there is no national legislation which specifically regulates sky lanterns, the approach is fragmented with some councils introducing bye laws to control releases on council-owned land. With around 200,000 sky lanterns being sold and released each year they continue to pose a significant threat. The Trading Institute (TSI) published a code of practice¹ in 2014 following concerns around the safety of sky lanterns. The guidance, however, is for manufacturers and retailers who have a responsibility to produce safe products for the market.

The impact of sky lanterns

Animals/wildlife

Sky lanterns can cause harm to animals in several ways; they can damage their environment due to wildfires, cause suffering or death through burning via direct contact with lanterns or ingestion of or entanglement in lantern debris, or cause animals to become frightened by an airborne lantern. Due to this, there are an increasing number of organisations who support a sky lantern ban on the basis of protecting animals and wildlife, such as the British Veterinary Association (BVA), the RSPCA, the Marine Conservation Society (MCS), the British Horse Society (BHS).

The RSPCA states sky lanterns can cause harm to animals through ingestion, entanglement, splinters/ embedment, inflicting direct burns or causing fires and they have received reports of animals becoming entangled in debris. Recently, the RSPCA demonstrated this danger by

¹ <https://www.tradingstandards.uk/news-policy/news-room/2014/industry-puts-safety-first-with-sky-lantern-code-of-practice>

sharing a photograph on social media² of a dog which had become entangled in a lantern, the wire was caught in its mouth.

Animals can be naturally inquisitive, if there is a foreign object in their field, they may investigate it. In one case, a cow reportedly consumed wire debris which caused its death, a post-mortem concluded the wire was from a sky lantern which had landed in the field.

News reports suggest animals spooked by lanterns are typically horses (although other animals can be spooked too). There have been several cases where lanterns have injured or burnt horses, or they have been frightened by the foreign object in the sky and consequently injured themselves as they try to escape. The British Horse Society (BHS) are strongly against the release of sky lanterns and state they have “*received terrible reports of internal and external injuries to horses and other livestock caused by wires from these lanterns.*”

Fire hazard

Sky lanterns are fuelled by hot air from a fuel cell and should land once the fuel has become extinguished. However, this is not always the case and there have been reports of lanterns landing whilst still alight or that the fuel cell is burnt out but still warm. This then still poses a fire threat to the area it lands on such as barns storing hay, stables housing horses or other livestock which often contain highly flammable bedding and forage, or dry moorland. A report³ for Defra in 2013 concluded “*that fire risk associated with the use of sky lanterns is significant*” and further considerations are required regarding potential mitigation options through the use and design of sky lanterns.

Due to the fire threat, the National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) has consistently advised against using sky lanterns. Recently, the NFCC reinforced their position in a statement following the sale of a sky lantern in support of the NHS “Clap for carers” campaign; “*NFCC does not advocate the use of sky lanterns under any circumstances. This kind of activity could quite easily put additional pressure on the fire service – and further strain on the NHS.*” This statement was reinforced by Defra.

In recent years there have been several fire reports in national and regional news which have caused serious damage to wildlife and the environment. For example, in 2013⁴ a sky lantern was caught on CCTV and believed to set fire to around 100,000 tonnes of plastic recycling at the Smethwick plant. Around 200 members of the fire crew attended and three firefighters were taken to hospital. More recently in January 2020⁵, a sky lantern caused a devastating fire at a zoo in Germany killing more than 30 animals.

Litter nuisance

Sky lanterns can unpredictably fall anywhere, which often leaves farmers and landowners with the burden of clearing up old lanterns and their remains from fields. Some organisations believe releasing sky lanterns is equal to littering and should be recognised as a punishable offence. The charity Keep Britain Tidy states: “*Balloon and lantern releases are simply flying litter*”, the National Parks England also released a statement saying it: “*wishes to see the release of sky lanterns classified as littering and therefore banned.*”

² https://twitter.com/RSPCA_official/status/1250069141387718657

³ <http://scienceresearch.defra.gov.uk/Default.aspx?Menu=Menu&Module=More&Location=None&Completed=0&ProjectID=18402>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-23123549>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-50971250>

The littering of sky lantern debris is a serious threat to the environment, animals and wildlife, and although some companies claim to use “biodegradable” materials such as bamboo it can still take decades to degrade.

Aviation

Sky lanterns also pose a threat to aviation traffic; damage could be caused through engine ingestion, interfering with air space or debris landing on the runway. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) have outlined a set of guidelines⁶ which must be followed when releasing sky lanterns to avoid conflict with aviation. Despite these guidelines the study presented to Defra in 2013 states it is unlikely that the casual user is aware of these guidelines, meaning there is poor enforcement behind them and consequently still a significant threat.

Developments in Westminster

In 2019 Labour MP Ruth George, who represents High Peak in Derbyshire, introduced a Ten Minute Rule Bill⁷ to prohibit the use of sky lanterns in England. The Bill was unopposed during its first reading but did not make it through Parliament and did not progress any further.

After the Bill failed to make it through Parliament, organisations such as the NFU, RSPCA and MCS have focused their lobbying efforts at local councils, encouraging them to implement a ban on council-owned land. The NFU has received a positive response to their campaign, from 1st December 2020- 12th January 2021, 6,352 supporters have engaged with the NFU’s sky lantern e-action tool and 174 English and Welsh councils have voluntarily introduced a ban. These results highlight there is a desire to protect animals and the environment from sky lanterns. However, this ban only prohibits the release on council-owned land and does not cover privately-owned land highlighting the need for a consistent approach across the whole of the UK.

Ask:

We are calling on the Government to introduce a complete ban on the use of sky lanterns, to clamp down on the dangers and harm posed to our rural communities, horses, livestock and wildlife. We believe this can be achieved through the introduction of Regulations under the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

Section 140 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 gives the Secretary of State regulatory making powers to prohibit or restrict the importation, use, supply or storage of injurious substances or articles if they can cause harm to the environment, human or animal health. We believe there is sufficient evidence to show that sky lanterns cause harm to the environment and animal health.

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⁶ <https://publicapps.caa.co.uk/docs/33/CAP736.PDF>

⁷ [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-03-27/debates/0FAB4869-23CB-4422-9EB1-ABA96E1E4B94/SkyLanterns\(Prohibition\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2019-03-27/debates/0FAB4869-23CB-4422-9EB1-ABA96E1E4B94/SkyLanterns(Prohibition))