

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the problems caused by sky lanterns, and invites your thoughts on the subject.

Every time people release Chinese sky lanterns into the air, my blood boils. They may be beautiful as they drift across the night sky, but what goes up must come down – and that is the problem.

Sky lanterns were in the news again recently, when a mother and her two grown-up daughters celebrated the new year by releasing five near Krefeld Zoo, in Germany. One landed in the zoo and started a fire. The entire ape house burned down and more than 30 animals were killed, including five orangutans, two gorillas and a chimpanzee. Sky lanterns are illegal in most parts of Germany, including Krefeld, and the three women now face a prison sentence of up to five years for negligent arson.

Sky lanterns were first used in China more than 1,500 years ago, to send signals during times of war. But now they are popular worldwide at weddings, music festivals, graduations and charity events. Made of paper, with frames of bamboo or wire, they have an open candle or fuel cell inside to heat the air and make them rise like hot air balloons. Hundreds of thousands are released in the UK every year – and many millions more worldwide.

They are a shocking fire hazard. Lanterns can fly more than 3000 into the air and float for miles. Manufacturers and retailers claim that they drop to the ground only when the flames burn out, but sometimes the paper catches fire or the wind blows them down while the candle or fuel cell is still alight. One set fire to a plastic-recycling plant in

the West Midlands (it was the largest blaze the region's firefighters had ever seen). Another, in Donegal, landed near a container packed with thousands of gallons of aviation fuel. Meanwhile, they have caused countless grassland and forest fires everywhere from the US to Vietnam (which banned them after nearly 20 such fires in a matter of months).

Fire isn't the only problem. They are often marketed as 'biodegradable'. But don't be fooled. Sure, the paper might break down after littering the ground for a while, but what about the frames? Bamboo lanterns can take decades to degrade, and wire ones even longer. The RSPCA and the National Farmers' Union report many gruesome injuries and painful deaths after livestock and wildlife have eaten lantern wire. Animals can get tangled up in the framework or trapped, too.

“Sky lanterns are a shocking fire hazard, yet millions are released worldwide.”

Lanterns floating out to sea is another issue. Marine animals suffer just as much as those on land. And, since the lanterns can look like distress flares, the coastguard and RNLi waste valuable time dealing with false alarms.

The bottom line is simple. Chinese sky lanterns need to be banned.

Unfortunately, the Government doesn't agree. A 2013 Defra report did not call for a ban, claiming that much of the evidence was anecdotal and that the risk of injury to livestock is 'low'. And Labour MP Ruth George's 2019 Private Members' Bill – the Sky Lanterns (Prohibition) Bill – seems to have died its own death in Parliament.

The good news is that many responsible local councils are taking matters into their own hands, with bans on releasing sky lanterns from council land. But it's nowhere near enough. We need to follow the lead of countries that have banned sky lanterns outright, including Australia, Spain and Brazil (where launching lanterns is an environmental crime, punishable by up to three years in jail – more than a little ironic, given president Jair Bolsonaro's abject failure to prevent the recent surge of fires in Amazonia).

Will it take another major catastrophe before our politicians act? I hope not. 🙄

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Beautiful but deadly: sky lanterns pose a real danger.