



Photo Credit: Xiaolong Wong

Should We Stop Using Helium for Entertainment?

BY OLIVIA LAUBE

Helium is something that we see used all of the time. Helium balloons, for example, are everywhere: parties, celebrations, and even in hospital rooms. They are something that most people do not give a second thought about, but maybe they should. Helium is the only element on earth that is completely nonrenewable, and scientists believe that it may run out within the next 25-30 years. With helium being a finite resource, an important question is posed: Should we stop using it for entertainment purposes?

Helium is generated deep underground through the decay of elements like uranium and thorium. This process takes many millennia, and is not something that can be sped up. The helium then seeps up through the earth's crust and becomes trapped in pockets of natural gas. This is the place where it is extracted. Helium is lightweight, and does not combine with other elements. It can easily escape Earth's gravitational pull. It is the only element to physically disappear from the planet. Because it cannot be generated within a lifetime or created artificially, and it escapes our reach easily, helium is an extremely finite resource. But why does that matter?

Besides entertainment, helium is used in many other ways. It is used as a cooling medium for

medical devices, such as MRI scanners, and satellite instruments. It was used for this purpose in the Apollo space vehicles. It fills weather balloons and airships, as well as provides a protective atmosphere for making fiber optics and semiconductors. It can be used to detect leaks in things such as car air-conditioning systems, and it fills vehicle airbags because it diffuses quickly. It is even used in supermarkets to scan items at checkout. By knowing each of these uses, it shows just how valuable helium is to everyday life. Each of these things would be a lot harder without the ability to use helium.

Some argue that the use of helium for entertainment purposes is trivial, because it makes up only a small percentage of the helium used. This is not a great perspective to have. Every little bit of the resource used is less that is available for the future. There are also other negative impacts for the use of helium in this way. Helium balloons are harmful to the environment because they threaten wildlife and are a source of litter. Their release can cause birds and marine life to ingest balloons and

then starve because of the blockage of their digestive tracts. Another entertaining use of helium, creating a squeaky voice, also poses health risks of dizziness, headaches, and death. These negative impacts, along with the finite amount of helium, help build the case that helium should not be used for entertainment.

Generally, helium used in entertainment is thought of as something fun and without consequences. People do not understand that the resource is limited, and that its other uses are far more valuable to everyday life. Even though it makes up a small percentage of helium use, each time it is used for entertainment, there is less

helium for things more important. People need to be aware of the environmental impact and consequences to using helium however they please. By knowing these things, it is possible to extend the time where helium is still available so we have it for the things that are more important.

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