

RSC condemns helium balloon-powered Atlantic crossing

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The Royal Society of Chemistry is troubled by news today of the gross waste of a precious element, in a world record attempt to fly across the Atlantic using helium balloons.

Balloonist Jonathan Trappe will begin his attempt to float from the United States to Paris in a lifeboat suspended from 370 giant cluster balloons, containing enough helium to inflate 400,000 party balloons, in just a few days, according to today's Metro newspaper.

Helium is the second most abundant element in the universe, but here on earth, it's becoming increasingly rare.

The Royal Society of Chemistry's science manager, Dr James Hutchinson, said: "While Mr Trappe is attempting a remarkable feat, when you know how precious helium is, it seems crazy to use such a large volume of it in such a frivolous way."

"Helium scarcity is a really serious issue. It is used in a wide range of applications that affect our daily lives, including many medical applications. It is also critical for operating a lot of equipment used in scientific research, so we really cannot afford to waste it.

"Many people guess that we extract helium from the air, but in fact we mostly obtain it as a by-product of [oil extraction](#) and our supply is finite. Helium is lighter than air, so once it is released into the atmosphere, it just floats off into space and we lose it forever."

Dr Hutchinson continued: "Helium is lighter than air and chemically inert so it can be combined with oxygen to produce a mixture that can aid breathing. This mixture is called heliox and is used to support newborn babies with breathing difficulties. It also used by deep sea divers to help them breathe underwater.

"Liquid helium has the lowest boiling point of any substance so it is also used for a wide variety of cooling purposes, including providing the low temperatures needed to operate the [superconducting magnets](#) in MRI scanners, and cooling nuclear reactors."

In the face of its decreasing supply, a number of scientists have warned against the non-essential use of helium in things such as party balloons. In the run-up to the 2012 Christmas Lectures, which were supported by the Royal Society of Chemistry, chemist and Christmas Lecturer, Dr Peter Wothers, called for a ban on [helium balloons](#).

Dr Hutchinson added: "The issues around scarcity of important natural resources, such as helium, are a top priority for the Royal Society of Chemistry and we continue to work closely with scientists and governments to address these challenges head-on."

Provided by Royal Society of Chemistry

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