

European Commission slammed for links to West Bank lab

Scientists call for project led by Natural History Museum to cut ties with Israeli company.

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The European Commission and London's venerable Natural History Museum are facing criticism for working with an Israeli company with operations in the West Bank occupied territories. The company, cosmetics firm Ahava Dead Sea Laboratories, is part of a €5.19-million (US\$6.7-million) research project on the toxicity of nanoparticles.

In a 17 January [letter](#) published in the British newspaper *The Independent*, 21 academics and public figures decry the museum's involvement with the company, which has facilities in an Israeli settlement in the West Bank. The International Court of Justice has determined that such settlements are illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention, the letter says. The Israeli government maintains that the settlements are legal, but many countries, including the [United States](#) and the [United Kingdom](#), consider the settlements to be illegal.

The firm, which sells cosmetics made of minerals extracted from the Dead Sea, received more than €300,000 to perform laboratory analyses for a project called NanoReTox, which is part of the Seventh European Commission Framework Programme, a €50-billion funding package for EU research for 2007–13.

The Natural History Museum (NHM) is coordinating NanoReTox, which began in December 2008 and ends this year. The project aims to determine the potential environmental and health effects of nanomaterials. The project involves several other institutions, including Imperial College London, Kings College London and the US Geological Survey.

"It should be brought to people's attention that the NHM of all organizations is very much tied up in a project that involves the exploitation of Palestinian resources," says Malcom Levitt, a chemist at the University of Southampton, UK, who signed the letter. His co-authors include Patrick Bateson, a zoologist at the University of Cambridge, UK, and president of the Zoological Society of London.

Ian Owens, NHM director of science, said in a written statement that the European Commission approved the participation of Ahava Dead Sea Laboratories when it hired the NHM to lead the project. The museum found the company through a European Commission website that lists partners approved for Framework-funded projects.

"When selecting research partners we focus on their scientific appropriateness, and because they were offered through a recognized European Commission channel, we did not investigate their background further," says Chloe Kembery, a spokeswoman for the NHM.

Ongoing scrutiny

Ahava Dead Sea Laboratories has been the subject of consumer protests and boycotts since at least 2009. The company's manufacturing facilities and laboratories are located in the West Bank occupied territories, in the Mitzpe Shalem kibbutz, which partially owns the firm. However, the company lists its headquarters near Tel Aviv, in the state of Israel. Ahava Dead Sea Laboratories did not respond to *Nature's* request for comment, but in the past it has defended its operations and contended that Mitzpe Shalem is not an illegal settlement.

In response to questions about Ahava Dead Sea Laboratories from a European Parliament member this summer, the European Commission said that the company is based within the state of Israel and therefore eligible for research funding under the Framework Programmes. The company has received more than €1 million in such funds under four different projects, including NanoReTox.

"I believe that the EU should not be allowed to fund companies that breach international law and so I have asked the commission to revise its research-funding regulations so that participating laboratories must declare the location of their research in order that, where



DAVE PORTER / PHOTOSHOT

London's Natural History Museum has drawn criticism for working with an Israeli company that operates in occupied West Bank territory.

that location is illegal, EU funding can be withheld,” says Keith Taylor, a British Green Party member of the European Parliament, who raised the questions about Ahava Dead Sea Laboratories in June 2011.

A spokesperson for the European Commission declined to comment on whether it would consider such changes in its next Framework Programme, called Horizon 2020. But in response to another question from Taylor, the Commission [said on 13 September 2011](#) that it was “scrutinizing options to be able to evaluate and potentially address such a situation” under Horizon 2020.

Bateson says that Ahava Dead Sea Laboratories should not be eligible for Horizon 2020 funding as long as it continues to operate in the West Bank. “The initial mistake was at Brussels. They shouldn’t have allowed this to go ahead,” he says.

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