

AUB team spearheads international consortium for marine biodiversity to study organisms with therapeutic potential

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An AUB team of scientists and researchers helped spearhead a six-million-euro international project that will study the potential therapeutic properties of marine resources, while preserving biodiversity.

Members from ibsar, the Nature Conservation Center for Sustainable Futures at the American University of Beirut, had initiated discussions with a Finnish team, back in 2008, to establish joint research projects rooted in biodiversity.

The result was Project MAREX, which brings together 19 academic, research and industrial partners from 13 countries (Belgium, Chile, Finland, France, India, Italy, Lebanon, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and UK), who will collaborate to collect, isolate, and classify marine organisms from the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans as well as from the Mediterranean, Baltic, and Arabian Seas.

Extracts of marine organisms will be studied for several therapeutically and industrially significant biological activities, including anticancer, anti-inflammatory, antiviral, and anticoagulant activities by applying a wide variety of screening tools, as well as for ion channel/receptor modulation and plant growth regulation.

AUB Professors Najat A. Saliba and Marwan E. El-Sabban attended the project's kickoff meeting held in Helsinki, Finland in early October 2010, during which the four-year, six-million-euro MAREX project entered the realm of implementation.

"This project asserts AUB's leadership position as both regional and international partner in issues related to biodiversity," said El-Sabban, who teaches human morphology at AUB.

"Several members of ibsar, with diverse expertise, will now engage in extraction, bio-fractionation and screening for important biological activities and industrial applications from marine organisms both from local sources and from other partners across the globe," explained Saliba, a chemistry professor.

Among the key objectives of the MAREX project are to find more environmentally-conscious marine sources of biotechnology products and increase public awareness about marine biodiversity.