

trip

# Water warriors in the Mid-East

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**T**HIS summer I was fortunate to be sent by Monash University's Faculty of Law on an internship to Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME). The non-governmental organisation works on environmental cross-border issues between Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian territories.

With head offices in Tel Aviv, Amman and Bethlehem, FoEME's primary objective is to promote cooperative efforts of sustainable regional development and protection of shared environmental heritage. Water management issues are the main focus because the Middle East is one of the world's most arid regions.

On my first day at FoEME's unassuming Tel Aviv office, the Israeli director Gidon Bromberg (former Australian resident and Monash law graduate) informed me that I would be in charge of writing a letter to the inspection panel of the World Bank following its proposal to rejuvenate the shrinking Dead Sea.

The sea – the world's saltiest body of water and the lowest place on earth – is dropping one metre each year. It has already diminished to a third of its original surface area and by 25 metres in depth.

When the problem was first discovered and mentioned in the Knesset, the common response was, "It's dead anyway." Now the World Bank, with the support of the Israeli and



**Anna Landau dips her toes into the Dead Sea, Jordan.**

Jordanian governments, has proposed a water conduit over 200 kilometres long to bring the sea water from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea.

This risky option includes dredging the coral reefs in Eilat/Aqaba and changing the composition of the waters of the Dead Sea itself. However, the World Bank has refused to look at alternatives to this conduit, such as rejuvenating the Jordan River, the Dead Sea's historical, natural fresh water source.

It is this apparent failure to study vital alternatives that formed the basis of my letter to the World Bank's inspection panel.

I was also fortunate to join FoEME's international delegation on a week-long tour through Jordan, Israel and the West Bank.

On the tour, we saw first-hand both the beauty and the issues of the region. I also visited a lush area just over the Jordan border, which FoEME is attempting to turn into a "Peace Park".

It is hoped that the land – given to Jordan in the 1994 peace agreement and leased to Israeli kibbutzim in the area – will become a place where Israelis and Jordanians watch the 500-million plus migratory birds that cross the Jordan River valley twice annually.

The project is designed to provide greater opportunities for biodiversity protection, cooperative management and collaboration between the neighbouring countries.

On our visit, a young Israeli expressed his optimism, "For 14 years we have had 'silent peace' with Jordan. This is the first time I can see a practical peace becoming a reality."

By focusing on cross-border environmental issues, this organisation is able to surpass the turbulence of the region, and create peaceful dialogue and cooperation based on advancing sustainable regional development.

*Anna Landau is a fifth year arts/law student at Monash University. For more information on FoEME visit [www.foeme.org](http://www.foeme.org).*