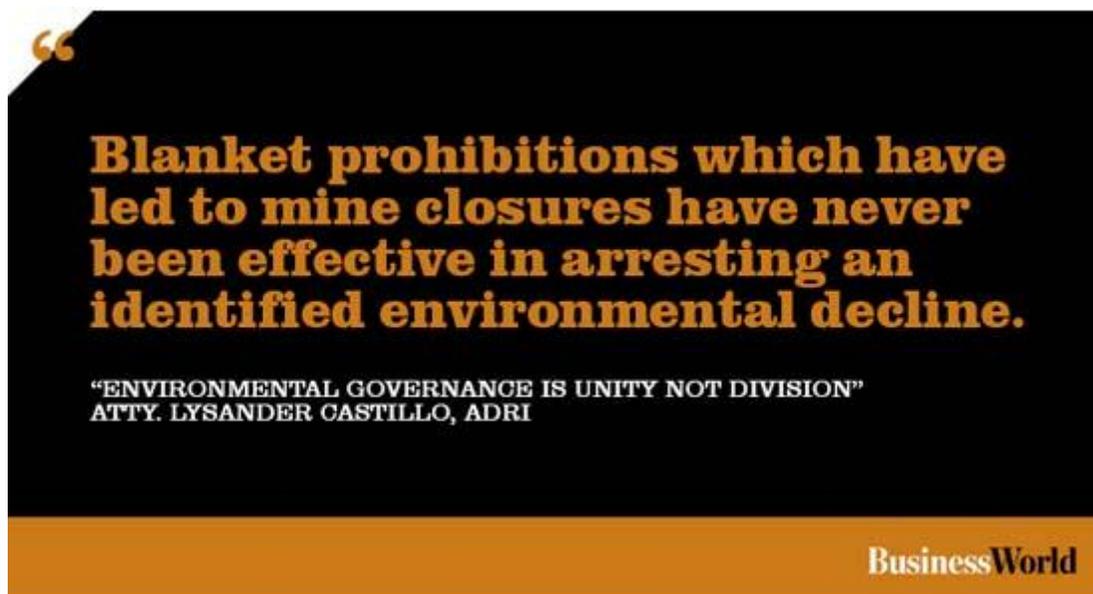


Environmental governance is unity not division

Opinion

Thinking Beyond Politics, Lysander Castillo
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The complexities of managing the environment, that is, balancing the preservation of the physical world and ensuring the welfare of the people who live off it, are far-reaching and never operate in a vacuum. Anything that happens in one corner will be felt elsewhere in the system. This interconnectedness of species and ecosystems should be obvious just by looking at the globe, our one and only home.



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As such, the sound management of the environment requires the involvement and cooperation of people and their communities. This is the context that frames our country's environmental governance. There is a need for a type of governance that includes everyone -- marginalized and demonized alike. The country needs a brand of environmental governance that has the capacity to see the forest and not the trees, so to speak. For all its richness in resources, the Philippines needs a style of governance that is rightly passionate, but without being discriminatory or myopic.

SINGLE-ISSUE FIXATION

This is hardly the case in the leadership at the helm of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). The Secretary cannot seem to differentiate between her personal advocacies and the responsibility of governing. Her single-issue fixation on mining detracts from the many other important environmental concerns that this country faces, possibly leading to environmental harm and not protection.

If the DENR keeps it up, mining may even be accused of causing climate change. After all, forests are cleared, thereby reducing nature's capacity to absorb greenhouse gases. Never

mind that although mining causes great environmental disturbance, the law provides for rehabilitation -- the replanting of trees.

What about the establishment of urban centers and plantations? Do they not clear forests, and permanently at that? In all things, the government weighs costs and benefits, both to the people and to the environment. Around the world, societies have needed mining to advance, in the same way that people need to build homes and plant crops.

We lament how mining is projected to be the main environmental problem, when there are more strategic issues to be addressed. The West Philippine Sea massive reclamation by China has destroyed rich biodiversity and essential coral reef systems in the millions of hectares. For a country with a population largely dependent on fish catch and unique in the entire world for its mega-diversity, the issue must be up there in the priority list. Another urgent issue is the mounting solid waste management problem. The Filipinos now number more than a 100 million; with a dysfunctional landfill system, one can just imagine where all that waste will go -- rivers, esteros, reservoirs, water sheds.

BLANKET POLICIES ARE INEFFECTIVE

With mining projected to be the main environmental enemy, the DENR's response is to close the operations of the large mines. Unfortunately, our experience tells us that blanket prohibitions have never been effective in arresting an identified environmental decline.

The Philippine forest cover has been in a steady decline since the turn of the century and no amount of log ban was able to address that, including the de facto total log ban implemented by the Aquino administration in 2011.

One need not go that far to realize that shutting down large-scale mining is not the key to abating wanton destruction of the environment. Executive Order No. 79, issued in 2012, halted the approval of new mining projects, but illegal, unregulated mining persisted. This is unless, of course, the perspective of the DENR is that only the highly regulated large-scale mining is capable of environmental degradation.

If an outright ban does not work, then it must be the proper implementation of the law, rules and regulations that can lead to effective environmental governance. Undoubtedly, changing the rules in the middle of the game will not help this cause. The mining industry observes a 25-year cycle before a mine can be said to have fully operated. Hence, amending the Mining Act, which has been in full operation for only eight years, cannot be construed as a proper implementation of the law.

UNITY TOWARD ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

The question of capacity to govern is inescapable in the proper implementation of the laws. It cannot be over-emphasized that managing the environment requires the cooperation of all stakeholders and not just of certain sectors. The leader may not have the scientific expertise, but what is important is to be able to bring everyone together and have that sense of unity for the common cause of environmental stewardship.

If Secretary Regina Lopez sows division and not unity and narrowly picks on miners, the opposite of stewardship could be the result. She must move past her refusal or inability to analyze the technical complexities of developmental stewardship of the environment.

Mining will not stop. It has not since man learned to make stone tools. Illegal and destructive mining will proliferate given the resources, the poverty incidence, and the poor record of law enforcement we have.

The big winners of the present crusade are the gold smugglers and thousands of illegal, often small-scale mining operators. They continue to rob the government of billions in tax revenues, exploit children under inhuman and dangerous work conditions, and openly violate environmental regulations. Unless corrected, this situation will turn into an environmental and economic loss for the Philippines.

Lysander Castillo, Environment Fellow at the Stratbase ADR Institute and Secretary-General of Philippine Business for Environmental Stewardship (PBEST).