

Taking the environment in perspective

By [Lysander Castillo](#) (philstar.com) | Updated February 9, 2017 - 9:55am



The Philippine forest cover has been in a steady decline since the turn of the century, and no logging limitations nor the almost total log ban implemented by the Aquino administration in 2011 changed that. [Philstar.com/File photo](#)

The task of managing the environment is complex, no matter where you are in the world. The manager must balance the protection of the physical environment with the welfare of people who live off the land. After all, environmental pressures are the result of human presence and human needs. Moreover, the consequences of environmental policies are far-reaching in an inter-connected system like ours, anything that happens in one corner will be felt in another.

When thinking about environmental governance in the Philippines, it becomes even more important that stakeholders are involved. Governance should include the traditionally marginalized and even the easily demonized, to obtain the full story of human reliance on natural resources and to ensure that the government's policies reflect the needs of all. This type of governance requires a leader to see the forest and not the trees, to be passionate not rash, to be expansive not discriminatory.

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Applying this perspective to the current Department of Environment and National Resources (DENR) secretary, we reach a disappointing conclusion. By fixating on mining as almost an inherent evil, she has not paid attention to the lessons of Philippine environmental policy nor to the myriad of other environmental ailments

that plague this country. We have not seen her ability to distinguish her personal advocacy from the demands of her office, and in such a way she may foster more environmental harm than protection.

Lessons from managing natural resources

With mining projected to be the main environmental enemy, the knee-jerk response is to suspend the operations of and close 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 logging limitations nor the almost total log ban implemented by the Aquino administration in 2011 changed that. In a similar manner, 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 flourished.

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The Philippine experience with bans shows that the proper implementation of existing laws, rules and regulations are the most important parts of environmental governance. Changing the rules in the middle of the game will not help this cause. Mines work on a 25-year cycle. Amending the Mining Act now, only eight years in operation is neither the proper implementation of the law nor fair to law-abiding miners and communities.

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The question of capacity to govern is inescapable in the proper implementation of the laws. It cannot be overly emphasized that managing the environment requires the cooperation of all stakeholders and not just of certain sectors. The leader may not have scientific expertise, as the physical environment is a study of science at the end of the day, but they must be able to bring everyone together toward a common cause, proper environmental stewardship.

Abandoned environmental causes

The current fixation on mining also makes it appear to be the most urgent environmental problem of our time. The weather disturbances caused by climate change and the policies that enable the problem are surely more significant. Funnily enough, miners are required to plant trees to offset their activities while property developers and plantation owners have no such requirement. And yet, as much as people need homes and food, so too do they use the end products of mining activity.

Thus, we lament how too few have taken up the cudgels for other important environmental issues. Philippine biodiversity and fisheries concerns have been dealt major blows by China's massive land reclamation in the West Philippine Sea where millions of hectares have been destroyed. For a country reliant on the fish catch, where the ocean is the "employer of last resort," this concern must be a high priority.

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A third issue is the mounting solid waste management problem. The Filipinos are now numbering more than a 100 million. With a highly ineffective landfill system in place, our waste will soon bombard our rivers, esteros and reservoirs. When the flooding of our urban centers worsens, we can also expect the spread of diseases.

Conclusion

If our environmental leadership continues to sow division, the country will not reap greater environmental protection. The unregulated and devastating effects of small-scale mining will not abate, the reduction in national forest cover will not be reversed, our fishermen will have less security in their livelihoods and we will all be more vulnerable to disease. Environmental governance requires a leadership that can take all of these issues in hand—we need more of this from the DENR.

Lawyer Lysander Castillo is an environment fellow at the Stratbase-ADR Institute and the secretary-general of Philippine Business for Environmental Stewardship, or PBEST.

(Article retrieved from: <http://www.philstar.com/news-feature/2017/02/09/1670568/taking-environment-perspective>)