The purpose of this paper is to try and resolve tensions between two perspectives on politics and natural resources management in the Philippines. According to one perspective, natural resources management fails because it is accomplished in an overly centralized, top-down manner that neglects local input and local knowledge. This perspective makes sense for the Philippines because the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), remains one of the most centralized bureaucracies in the Philippines. This has remained the case for the DENR even after the Local Government Code of 1991 transferred functions of agencies like the Department of Agriculture to local government units.

Another perspective, although not in direct confrontation with the first, points out that power has not been centralized in the hands of the bureaucracy as has been the case in neighbors such as Thailand and Indonesia. Instead, power remains in the hands of politicians whose power bases are largely local in nature. Therefore, bureaucracies are generally weak actors that serve as patronage tools for politicians.

These two perspectives come into conflict when the DENR’s management of natural resources is viewed to be the fault of top-down management while at the same time that Philippine bureaucracies are weak vis-à-vis (local) political pressure. In order to attempt to resolve these tensions, this paper will examine ways in which the DENR is manipulated for political ends. As a result of this manipulation, the DENR’s actions appear overly top-down and overcentralized to some people, when in fact local bureaucrats are serving the interests of local elites.