The politics of decentralizing national parks management in the Philippines

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Abstract

International donors and state bureaucrats in the developing world have promoted decentralization reform as the primary means to achieve equitable, efficient and sustainable natural resource management. Relatively few studies, however, consider the power interests at stake. Why do state agencies decentralize power, what political patterns unfold, and how do outcomes affect the responses of resource users? This paper explores decentralization reform by investigating the political processes behind the Philippine state’s decisions to transfer authority over national parks management to local government units. Drawing on a case of devolved management at Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park, Palawan Island, we examine how political motives situated at different institutional scales affect the broader process of decentralization, the structure of management institutions, and overall livelihood security. We demonstrate how power struggles between the Philippine state and City Government of Palawan over the right to manage the national park have impacted the livelihood support offered by community-based conservation. We conclude that decentralization may offer empowering results when upper-level policies and political networks tie into sufficiently organized institutions at the local level.

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Introduction

Through international donor support and pressure, countries in the developing world continue to embrace decentralization as the primary means to achieve equity, efficiency and sustainability in the governance of natural resources (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999; Andersson, 2004; Larson & Ribot, 2004; Sundar, 2001). For the conservation of forest resources, in particular, central governments increasingly turn to decentralized protected areas as a political tool for transferring decision-making authority to rural populations (Agrawal & Ostrom, 2001; Ribot, 1999). Through “devolved” conservation, park managers build on local needs and knowledge so that users can manage and benefit from forest resources more equitably and efficiently (Nygren, 2005; Pimbert & Pretty, 1995). Based on numerous accounts, however, resource dependent peoples often fail to access the purported benefits of devolved conservation, even through so-called community-based conservation. As Enters and Anderson (1999: 6) write, “decentralization and devolution of management responsibilities continue to be so widely viewed as the only solution for maintaining ecosystems that it has become heresy to question them”.

While several developing countries claim success in decentralizing authority over natural resources (Agrawal & Ostrom, 2001), the democratic “optimum” it calls for fails to reflect the complexity of local reality (Baviskar, 2004; Songorwa, 2004; Nygren, 2005; Tyler-Dickovick, 2005). Those upholding the virtues of decentralization speak a “new emancipatory language of democracy, pluralism, and rights,” which seldom reflects the complexity of conservation, local politics, and livelihood dynamics (Larson & Ribot, 2004: 1). Numerous studies that engage such complexity recognize that no one model of decentralization produces successful democratic outcomes in support of conservation objectives and livelihood strategies (Bird & Rodriquez, 1999; Eaton, 2001). Implementing decentralization through normative and “narrowly defined institutional terms” only simplifies how societal factors influence such political reforms (Hadiz, 2004: 699).

Our study contributes to this literature by examining whether the democratic ideals of political decentralization can facilitate devolved governance for livelihood security through community-based conservation. Three questions drive this query. One, how do the political motives of various actors influence the broader governance objectives of political decentralization? Two, how and why do the particular political processes of decentralization affect devolved governance over land and forest resources? Three, what tensions exist between the desired and actual outcomes of decentralization among resource dependent peoples?

We address these questions by examining the political processes behind decentralization and the outcomes of devolved conservation at national parks in the Philippines. We consider whether decentralization and devolved governance can support biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction, otherwise known as community-based conservation (Berkes, 2004; Kellert, Mehta, Ebbin, & Lichtenfeld, 2000; Western and Wright, 1994). While we address how national-level laws and policies affect devolved conservation, to investigate whether such reforms support local livelihoods, we focus on Palawan Island and its flagship-protected area, the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park (see Fig. 1). This national park aims to protect a remarkable landscape of tropical rain forests, undulating karst mountains, and a “disappearing” river flowing through karst crevices and caves. The story of this park, one of contests in power between dueling park administrations (one representing the National Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the other from the City Government of Puerto Princesa) and shifts in management approaches, facilitates our investigation of the struggles over, and consequences of, decentralization on community-based conservation on Palawan Island.
Overlapping land rights, competition over land and forest resources, and devolved decision-making structures further complicate the case of decentralization in the Philippines, particularly Palawan. First, the national protected areas system now overlaps (often in upland areas) with the legally recognized ancestral “domain claims” of indigenous peoples. This means that while indigenous people have gained political rights, the rights of access to natural resources are controlled through the now-decentralized management of national parks (Bryant, 2000; Urich, Day, & Lynagh, 2001). In Palawan, the Tagbanua people of Barangay Cabayugan — one of three main indigenous groups on the island (Fox, 1954) — have benefited from an ancestral domain claim since 1997. This claim over territory overlaps with different political claims arising from the devolution of management and conflicting definitions over the extent of the national park. Second, since the 1950s, landless migrants from overpopulated, resource scarce islands (e.g., the Visayas) have settled in the uplands to compete with indigenous peoples over land and forest resources that national parks engulf and protect through devolved conservation (Dressler, 2005b). The political dynamics between the indigenous Tagbanua and migrant farmers and fishers add to the political struggles over decentralized parks management.

Drawing on the Palawan case study, we demonstrate that power struggles between different levels of government over the right to manage the national park are tied to conflicting political agendas, ideologies and networks of power. Each side mobilizes political connections, laws, and prevailing ideologies vis-à-vis decentralization to stake claims over the national park. In the end, the rights and responsibilities the DENR allocated to the government of Puerto Princesa City were used to fulfill political and economic ends, rather than
equitable and efficient community-based conservation. While some success is apparent, the conditions for and outcomes of democratic forest governance were far from optimal for resource dependent peoples.

This paper begins with a critical analysis of normative approaches to political decentralization in the context of developing countries. Section one, “Scrutinizing political decentralization”, further contextualizes this critique by drawing on a case from the Philippines where the state has pushed for the decentralization of forest governance and national park management throughout the Archipelago. Section two, “Decentralization of forest resources in the Philippines”, explores the consequences of political decentralization on the people and forest resources of Palawan Island and of Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park. Our analysis shows how transfers of authority from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources to the City Government of Puerto Princesa led to power struggles over park management that adversely affected devolved conservation objectives, management efficiency, and livelihood security. Section three, “Decentralized national park management and local resource use”, concludes that the process of decentralization may only allow marginalized peoples to access the benefits of devolution once their institutions are sufficiently organized and linked with secure tenure and political rights. We contend that devolved conservation must reflect the contextual complexity of a particular region and adjust to changing conditions by sustaining direct local involvement. Only in this way will the needs of marginalized peoples be incorporated into and supported by community-based conservation.

**Scrutinizing political decentralization**

Political decentralization continues to be upheld as an effective and efficient means for devolving conservation authority to the subnational level. Growing support for political decentralization among conservation and development agencies, in particular, rests in how its democratic objectives facilitate equitable, efficient and sustainable resource management (World Bank, 2005; WRI, 2005, chap. 5). Responding to the pressures of such consensus — which are often underwritten by grants and loan conditions — governments in the developing world adopt the main objective of political decentralization: to “achieve just political governance” under democratic ideals so that “humans [can] have a say in their own affairs” (Agrawal & Ostrom, 2001: 487). So-called weak states are now inclined to transfer authority to local populations to achieve the democratic ideals that “strong” states espouse: “better representation by creating and empowering representative local governments” (Jackson, 1990; Larson & Ribot, 2004: 3).

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1 Research was conducted from 2001 to 2004. The study used different qualitative and quantitative methods among forest users, actors in civil society and government officials (local, provincial, and national). Participant observation was the “meta-method” of choice and was complemented by a livelihood questionnaire (N = 157), key informant interviews, and focus group discussions in Barangay Cabayugan. Government officials and NGO staff were interviewed using (iterative) semi-structured interviews and archival work/grey literature searches were carried out at agencies in Puerto Princesa City and Manila. Free, prior, informed consent was given by Tagbanua. All data were cross-validated. For further details, see Dressler (2005a).

2 In this paper, devolved conservation refers to the devolution of political structures and programs, including policies and projects, that facilitate and support community-based conservation.

3 In many developing countries, implementing political decentralization and, by extension devolved conservation, often runs concurrent to and/or in support of attempts to liberalize markets through privatization and deregulation — a theme the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have promoted for decades (Harrigan, Wang, & El-Said, 2006; McCarthy, 2005).
Most agencies pursue such democratic outcomes by devolving conservation through three types of political decentralization, namely deconcentration, delegation and devolution. These are distinguished by how much political authority they transfer to the local level (Larson, 2002). Deconcentration involves the transfer of authority from the government to its own field units (or officials) who remain accountable to superiors, whereas delegation refers to the transfer of decision-making authority to semi-independent political units (e.g., parastatal). Devolution involves direct transfers of power to political institutions that operate with degrees of autonomy from the state in ways that “open-up” and sustain local democratic structures (Larson, 2002: 18).

Devolution in particular — the strongest, most direct transfer of power — serves state officials and donors well (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999; Larson, 2002). Despite relinquishing power, devolving authority over natural resources allows local users to “identify and prioritize their environmental problems” more efficiently, accurately and economically than state agencies (Larson, 2002: 18). Political decentralization’s democratic character suggests that devolved institutions can respond to the needs and mutual consent of local people (Renn, Webler, & Wiedermann, 1995; Vatter, 2000). That is, the state’s intent to fully devolve decision-making authority supposedly encourages direct public involvement, which, on moral and practical grounds, is necessary for achieving equity and equality in society (Bachrach & Botwinick, 1992). Devolved institutions overcome state deficiencies by framing the public’s opportunity of political engagement as a direct means to manage decisions affecting them (Renn et al., 1995). For both scholars and practitioners, the potential for local people to become involved in and take responsibility over decision-making remains the enduring objective of devolved conservation and development (Campbell & Vainio-Mattila, 2003; WRI, 2005, chap. 5).

While these virtues are laudable, political decentralization rarely achieves broad success when distributing authority over natural resources, particularly in fledgling democracies. Often a central government’s decision to decentralize political structures reflects values in political culture (e.g., the need for success) that stand apart from community perspectives on either conservation and/or livelihood security (Baviskar, 2004). Decentralized democratic structures appear well suited to clarifying and strengthening lines of authority in the “hierarchy of relationships” between resource users and park managers (Montinola, 1999: 5).

Understanding the complexity of decentralization requires some distance from normative and/or populist explanations of how and why certain social and environmental outcomes develop. Numerous studies suggest that countries cannot or simply do not choose the most appropriate form of decentralization (Eaton, 2001; Hadiz, 2004: 3). Direct public participation, equitable and sustainable management are not automatic outcomes of decentralization and democracy (Bird & Rodriguez, 1999; Hadiz, 2004; Sundar, 2001). Indeed, despite persistent theorizing and framework applications, the outcomes of decentralization reforms are largely dependent on a country’s institutional dynamics and political economy (Blair, 2000; Larson & Ribot, 2004).

Rather than applying an analytical blueprint to understanding political decentralization, we suggest assessing decentralization relative to the political economic context in which it is implemented. Since optimizing the democratic outcomes of decentralization is not always feasible due to changing levels of complexity, we propose interpreting its “building blocks” through degrees of achievement, rather than absolute measures of success. Interpreting the conditions that support democratic outputs, such as legitimate governance and political empowerment,
in a flexible manner creates space for nuanced analysis and realistic assessment of political decentralization (Larson & Ribot, 2004: 3). In this sense, the expected outcomes of devolved conservation are best interpreted through the relativist lens, where degrees of success or failure factor in local and regional dynamics.

One cannot simply assume that legitimate governance is a direct function of democratic performance, that is, how efficiently and equitably decentralized political structures cede power and respond to constituencies (Kohler-Koch, 1999). The political networks that make up government often produce powers and ideologies that “readjust” decentralization policies so that outcomes reflect their political interests and ideology. If legitimacy is a function of accountability, then the credibility of an elected government declines as its agencies fail to allocate authority in ways that reflects local demands. On the one hand, illegitimate governance can arise when actors in decentralized governments remain “upwardly accountable” to their leaders, rather than to political groups and/or citizens further down hierarchies (Larson & Ribot, 2004: 6). On the other hand, central governments also feel threatened by decentralizing their powers to local authorities for fear of losing control over “state-owned” natural resources. As a result, central governments recentralize control by consolidating patron–client relations, amending policies and laws, or simply neglecting service deliveries (Eaton, 2001). End users who receive few tangible benefits from an unresponsive central or local government tend to experience malaise and erosion of trust.

Even when upper-level bodies open democratic spaces for local bodies to voice their opinions, it is similarly problematic to assume that political empowerment will result (Blair, 2000). The potential for local constituencies to empower themselves by engaging upper-level bureaucrats often declines when corruption, political patronage and factions close communication portals (Blair, 2000; Mishra, 2006). State agencies can work with certain local representatives over others due to political patronage, while local institutions or organizations only “cooperate” with the state after certain conditions are met. Both local and state agencies vie for and control degrees of authority during and after decentralization.

The fact that governments may recognize the process of decentralization, but not always the local institutions to which rights are devolved, suggests that local users’ potential to manage and monitor natural resources can also diminish under devolved conservation. Government agencies, for example, can mediate preexisting social relations by co-opting or working through local institutions and conservation structures (Thompson, 1995). By polarizing political interests, “power clumping” may arise and override the potential for representative decision-making and political empowerment. Such outcomes reconfigure the democratic objectives of political decentralization, particularly the potential of community-based conservation.

In claiming that decentralization promotes optimal social and environmental outcomes, greater emphasis must be placed on clarifying the context of local and extra-local governance structures. With few exceptions, rural peoples, local administrations and central governments produce and reproduce socio-political relations, which directly influence the effectiveness of devolved conservation. Analyzing the dynamics between local and state actors, and the players in between, reveals the political conditions that influence central governments to cede powers to local authorities, and exposes how new political powers can affect rural livelihoods. Recent efforts to decentralize national parks management in the Philippines offer a pertinent case for examining the process and outcomes of devolving management authority to local users and government units.
Decentralization and forest resources in the Philippines

The people of the Philippine islands have endured several centuries of centralized government, where political hierarchies had little tolerance for dissent at the subnational level (Bird & Rodriquez, 1999; Brillantes, 2000). Contreras (2002: 4) notes that the colonial state’s use of “societal institutions of religion and education” — through forms of coercion, co-optation or delegitimization — facilitated “nation-building” where there was previously none. He writes that, without overarching political structures (e.g., kingships) and due to the country’s archipelagic character, “the state became the external necessity for elites to govern and mediate relations between the community, the national level and the state” (Contreras, 2002: 4).

Under Spanish colonial rule (1521–1898), primary administrative and bureaucratic procedures were centralized and managed out of Manila. State control over peripheral territories and peoples began with it imposing political boundaries over previously autonomous indigenous territories, such as Barangays. The Spaniards (and all subsequent governments) would use Barangays as “politico-administrative” units under local officials who, by being loyal to the state, collected taxes and governed local affairs (Brillantes, 2000). While the American colonial government (1902–1935) drafted policies in support of local autonomy, such as the organization of municipal councils, political and administrative governance remained centralized (Brillantes, 2000). Only after the Philippine government secured full independence in 1946, did it even consider devolving authority over financial administration to local governments (Kerkvliet, 1977). Rather than full devolution, state agencies only deconcentrated responsibilities to local governments with various bills, such as the Local Autonomy Act of 1950 and the Decentralization Act of 1967 (Eaton, 2001). Devolving authority directly to local governments was largely absent.

From 1965 until 1986, President Marcos effectively stalled any movement in civil society advocating for political decentralization. After imposing Martial Law in 1972, Marcos forcefully reversed any campaign to decentralize democratic structures to municipal and provincial officials (Brillantes, 2000; Contreras, 2000). By abolishing local elections and appointing local politicians, he insulated his bureaucracy from opposition and local resistance. Under majority rule, patron–client networks expanded outward, securing social control over dissidents and/or recalcitrant minorities (Montinola, 1999). Ironically, however, Marcos’ regime also produced the Integrated Social Forestry Programme (ISFP), the first to “recognize” the tenure of upland farmers. Rather than a real policy adjustment, Marcos used the program as a decentralized political tool for quelling insurgents and keeping Kaingineros [sic] out of state forests (Contreras, 2000; see PD 705, 1975). Programs aimed at devolving responsibility over the use and management of resources gave the government indirect means to control people and forests (Vitug, 2000).

With a restive, but partly muted civil society, Marcos shored up political patronage and allegiance by offering political friends and allies ownership of, and royalties from, timber concessions (Bryant & Lawrence, 2005; Clad & Vitug, 1988). Politics and profits drove harvests to unsustainable levels. By 1976, for example, much of Palawan Island was under timber concessions owned by allies of Marcos (Conelly, 1983; Ocampo, 1996). Two companies with

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4 In 1935, the Philippines was “upgraded” in political status from US territory to American Commonwealth. The Americans granted full independence on July 4th, 1946 (Kerkvliet, 1977).

5 Kainginero is often used pejoratively when referring to shifting cultivators.
concessions, Alvarez’s Pagdanan Timber Products Company (PTPC) and Nationwide Princesa Timber Company Inc (NPTC), received timber allotments in northern Palawan amounting to 168,000 ha of forest cover (of 780,000 ha) (which brushed the boundaries of Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park) (Clad & Vitug, 1988: 4). By 1992, nearly 50% of the island had been deforested (Broad & Cavanagh, 1993; Eder & Fernandez, 1996; Kummer, 1992). Without doubt, problems of rampant deforestation and poverty in the Philippines resided in the central state’s inability to manage natural resources efficiently and accountably (Eder, 1999; McDermott, 2000; Vitug, 2000). As Vitug (2000: 11–12) writes, it was the “power-politics” of former presidents, such as Marcos, that directed forest and park management from a centrist-autocratic position (see National Parks Act, 1932). Presidential Decrees and corruption emanated from the central state, leading to what Broad and Cavanagh (1993) called the “plunder of paradise”.

Five years after the 1986 Revolution ousted Marcos, the new Aquino government (1986–1992) drafted the Local Government Code in support of a newly decentralized democratic agenda for the Philippines. Paralleling the IMF and World Bank’s objectives of political and fiscal reforms, the Code set out through donor support to decentralize political, fiscal and administrative authority to local government units and members of civil society (Hadiz, 2004; Harrigan et al., 2006). Specific objectives included the transfer and redistribution of basic delivery services and regulatory functions from the central government to local government units, including personnel, assets, and programs involving the devolved governance of natural resources (Bird & Rodriguez, 1999; Brillantes, 2000). The Code facilitated devolution through revenue sharing procedures between the central and local government, which meant that subnational officials no longer needed to lobby national politicians for funds, among other resources. Throughout the country, local governments and rural peoples soon acquired greater autonomy in decisions governing local revenue expenditure, political choice and representation, and forest management.

Supported by the 1987 Constitution, the Code enabled the Aquino and then Ramos (1992–1998) governments to decentralize national level responsibilities over resource management to agencies at the regional, provincial, and community level (Constitution of the Philippine Republic, 1987). For example, the National Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) redistributed and devolved management functions to field offices and staff in distant areas, though the central government retained a final say in many resource management decisions. (The national DENR’s management functions were broken down into the Provincial (PENRO) and Community level DENR (CENRO).) As Severino (2000: 87) notes “the Local Government Code [...] transformed substantive powers from national to local governments based on the belief that governors and mayors would be more sensitive to grass-roots concerns and that benefits to local communities would increase”. Similarly, Rood (1998) asserts that such policies increased public participation, government accountability, and local control over natural resources in the Philippines. After years of centralized management, few could temper the growing enthusiasm of decentralization’s potential to democratize the management of natural resources.

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6 For example, 40% of the central government’s tax revenue went to the local government, whereas Marcos only transferred 12% of national tax revenues (Eaton, 2001).

7 The national DENR’s management functions were broken down into the Provincial (PENRO) and Community level DENR (CENRO).
The ways in which decentralization reforms unfolded in the Philippines reveals that expected outcomes are often more complex and problematic in nature. On the one hand, the passing of the Local Government Code had surprised many, since members of Congress responsible for its passage were rivals of local government officials (Rood, 1998). Indeed, fearing a loss in fiscal authority and power, some national officials resisted the Code by directly reconcentrating political powers (Eaton, 2001). On the other hand, national politicians pushed for the passage of the Code in order to gain the support of local politicians who, in turn, could pressure national elites. With elites claiming wealth and power, decentralization facilitated control over political institutions and resources at the local level (Contreras, 2000, 2002; Eder, 1999; McDermott, 2000). As political elites exploited decentralization, they secured “monopolistic control” over institutions that shaped social relations among local users (Sidell, 1999). With rampant poverty and insecurity in villages, most political elites coerced vulnerable households into “getting their way” (Sidell, 1999). As Eder (1999: 19) notes,

Political dynasties...remain a continuing feature of Philippine politics, and political parties are characteristically based on personalities rather than issues. But the crucial constraint is the relatively unfettered ability of the wealthy and politically powerful to get their ways, including their way with the exploitation of natural resources, an ability captured by such terms as “predatory elite”.

Powerful bureaucrats used the inherent community bias of the Code’s policy rhetoric to facilitate the shift from coercive to community-based conservation in the Philippines (Severino, 2000). Once devolved management was achieved, agencies still managed to retain “the privileged knowledge...in environmental management which justifies the retention of state ownership and control over natural resources [on public lands]” (Gauld, 2000: 238).

In what follows, we describe how the decentralization of national parks management enabled state agencies and actors to consolidate control over forest resources through community-based conservation, an effort made easier through the Code’s legal provisions. During two decades, decentralized parks management evolved as a “networked system” wherein park managers could implement community-based conservation across the Archipelago.

The decentralized parks and protected areas system: 1980–1990s

The most comprehensive attempt at decentralizing parks and protected areas management in the Philippines to date is the Integrated Protected Area System (IPAS), inclusive of the Conservation of Priority Protected Areas Project and the National Integrated Protected Area Program. The initiative began in 1987, with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Haribon Foundation (a prominent Philippine environmental NGO), and the DENR sharing the goal of using the IPAS structure to identify, designate, and preserve a network of environmental “hot-spots” in the Philippines (WWF, 1991b: 3). IPAS objectives, for example, sought to conserve forests while “safeguard[ing] the culture and well-being of cultural communities” in the protected areas system (WWF, 1991b: 5). A Debt-for-Nature Swap supported this once unlikely partnership and the idea of decentralizing the management of seven protected areas, including Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park (WWF, 1991a).

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8 The World Bank Global Environmental Facility funded Phase II of the IPAS program, the Conservation of Priority Protected areas.
Phase I of the IPAS used remaining Debt-for-Nature Swap funds until 1992 to produce the legal, policy and infrastructure framework for the national protected areas system (World Bank, 1994: 9). Initially, the IPAS set out to identify, designate, and protect ten “high priority” protected areas (World Bank, 1994: 4), which, after fusing with the IPAS legal framework, resulted in the National Integrated Protected Area System Act (NIPAS Act, 1992, RA no. 7586). The final stage of Phase I decentralized the entire protected areas system, inclusive of infrastructure and management plans, effectively removing older park laws that supported central state control over forest resources.

Phase II of the integrated protected area system

Phase II of the IPAS ran from 1994 until 2002 as the Conservation of Priority Protected Areas Project. This phase emphasized direct support of devolved decision-making through non-governmental organizations, multi-stakeholder management boards, and Peoples’ Organizations (World Bank, 1992). World Bank funds, amounting to USD $16 million, supported project objectives of “biodiversity conservation…through … a system of reserves” (CPPAP, 1998: 1). The objective was to “empower local communities and indigenous peoples with firm tenure over …resources [and to]…engage them in non-destructive livelihood practices” (CPPAP, 1998: 3). Fulfilling this agenda required that Phase II projects establish and engage with a devolved network of NGOs and Peoples Organizations — called the NGOs for Integrated Protected Areas — to coordinate institutions locally in order to develop protected areas with community members. The project’s initiative of generating devolved political networks such as tripartite partnerships between NGOs, People’s Organizations, and the DENR, occurred through the Protected Area Management Boards as specified by the NIPAS Act (Bryant, 2000). In theory, devolved decision-making structures now offered local officials, various NGOs and resource users the opportunity to voice their needs and concerns directly to park managers.

The National Integrated Protected Area Program

The National Integrated Protected Area Program (NIPAP) ran concurrent to the above program to assist with the implementation of the NIPAS Act. Supported by the European Union and Philippine Government from 1995 to 2000, the program was to “contribute to the conservation […] of natural habitats and biodiversity” of eight priority sites. In these sites, managers set out to incorporate community perspectives and provide local residents with livelihood alternatives (NIPAP, 1997: 8). Local campaigns advanced these management objectives by enhancing community awareness and appreciation of natural resources and protected areas.

As these programs unfolded, human rights NGOs pressed national agencies for policies that offered indigenous peoples tenurial security in the Philippines. Concerted pressures resulted in DAO no. 2 (Series, 1993) and later the Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Act (IPRA Act, 1997), which granted indigenous peoples de facto and de jure tenurial rights through Certificates of

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9 As with other conservation initiatives at the time, the IPAS system was rooted in the rhetorical buzz of “sustainable development”, with the National Conservation Strategy and the Philippine Strategy for Sustainable Development leading the way.

10 Puerto Princesa (the St. Paul’s) Subterranean River National Park was not among the final list of ten national parks because it had already received Debt-for-Nature Swap funds for management upgrading.
Ancestral Domain Claims (CADCs). With NGO and/or government assistance, indigenous peoples could convert de facto CADCs into de jure certificates of domain title (CADT) adjacent to or inside of protected areas. Although CADCs did offer indigenous peoples’ greater freedom to harvest resources, the fact that they had to manage their land “collectively”, suited the strictures of devolved conservation under the NIPAS Act well, since both advocated for collective management.

Although this policy shift was unprecedented and cause for optimism, considerable uncertainty remained over whether such policies could be properly implemented “on the ground”. Could the combination of a devolved protected areas program and ancestral domain legislation actually empower indigenous peoples politically and offer livelihood support through community-based conservation? The following section demonstrates that, while the NIPAS management and zoning scheme pressed for local consultations, managers simply curbed their access to resources in “protected” core zones — areas Tagbanua once called home. It soon became apparent that the competing interests of upper and lower level agencies over the national park had less to do with directing policy for livelihood support than securing political and economic power.

Decentralized national park management and local resource use on Palawan Island

While broader political economic motives drove decentralized parks management in the Philippines at the national level, regional and local concerns were hardly powerless. The social, political and economic power relations between and among local, municipal and provincial levels — their ideologies and institutional relations, among other things — further influenced the management of local livelihoods. In this section, we trace how and why the devolution of Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park unfolded from upper bureaucracies down to municipal players on Palawan; subsequent sections examine whether devolved conservation actually democratizes management in support of rural livelihoods. We ask how the political motives of various actors influence the governance objectives of political decentralization, and how and why the process of decentralization affects devolved governance over land and forest resources.

Rather than producing optimal democratic outcomes, the Palawan case shows that the decentralization and devolution of management authority only positioned competing claims to access resources (by migrants and indigenous Tagbanua) against the political claims of government to secure control over one national park. In each case, different power clusters tried to control the park’s devolved management structure in order to fulfill their own political and economic aspirations.

After Marcos’ demise, the combination of decentralization reforms, a flourishing NGO network, and attention to deforestation on Palawan supported new laws and policies aimed at preserving biodiversity. These events culminated in Haribon’s successful lobby for a commercial logging ban on the island and the Palawan-specific Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) (RA 7611) of 1992. The SEP served as the legal “framework... for protect[ing]...natural resources and endangered environments of the province” (SEP Act, 1992: 2). The SEP and the Local Government Code provided the legal basis for local government units, such as the City Government of Puerto Princesa, to exercise authority over land and forest management, including the Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park located within its municipal boundaries.

The national park and its indigenous residents would serve as a premier ecological showcase for the central government’s efforts to decentralize and devolve natural resource management
on Palawan. Facing coercive conservation during and after the park’s creation in 1971 (under Marcos’ Presidential Decree 835 at 3901 ha), the indigenous Tagbanua of Cabayugan could now benefit by participating in resource management through NGO and government support. Moreover, by forming and joining new political institutions, Tagbanua resisted migrant control over forest resources and flat agricultural lands (see Fig. 2). Centralized, punitive approaches gave way to devolved conservation that apparently integrated local livelihood concerns with park management.

Government reforms, a vibrant civil society and new legal frameworks eventually shaped the structure and objectives of devolved management at the national park (World Bank, 1989: 1; World Bank, 2005). First, as the Debt-for-Nature Swap program ended, the provincial DENR hired a new park manager and community organizer who worked with NGOs to implement “integrated conservation and development” and later “community-based conservation”. Upon replacing his strict predecessor, Arturo Baltazar tried to rebuild support inside buffer areas by offering Tagbanua livelihood support; goats and pigs, he thought, might diversify their livelihoods (McDermott, 2000).

Second, indigenous rights NGOs organized Tagbanua to “collectively” tap livelihood projects, form Peoples’ Organizations, and use DAO no. 2 to establish de facto land claims (i.e., the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claim). With NGO support, the Tagbanua finally claimed their ancestral lands in 1997 and, in the process, secured strategic alliances with NGO networks. Many spoke on behalf of Tagbanua with discourse that framed secure tenure and livelihoods as a “moral imperative” (Bryant, 2000, 2002). The recognition of ancestral lands and livelihood “rights” thus appeared to be a beneficial consequence of devolution.

Third, two similar conservation laws, the Strategic Environmental Plan and National Integrated Protected Areas Act, decentralized park management under conflicting administrative jurisdictions. While both were national laws advocating democratic forest governance, the former law only pertained to Palawan Island. Each law directed agencies to pursue similar management objectives without clarifying which institutions steered devolution. Both laws, for example, support and develop multi-stakeholder management boards as parallel institutions with similar structures and strategies. On the one hand, the “official” NIPAS-backed Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) fell under the national and provincial DENR and consisted of appointed members, ranging from the DENR executive and representatives from the “Local Government Unit”, Barangay and “tribal community”, as well as members from NGOs or Peoples’ Organization, who represented local interests (NIPAS Act, 1992: 8; DAO no. 25 Series, 1992). On the other hand, the SEP supported policy and management board, the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD), held provincial and state officials, local government members, and one NGO appointee. Backed by the SEP, the Council’s “devolved” decision-making structures covered resource management issues on Palawan, which conflicted with

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11 Neither migrants nor Tagbanua are homogenous social groups. Due to inter-marriage and changing market relations, among other factors, both populations have overlapping socio-political relations and livelihoods strategies. For example, both migrants and Tagbanua cultivate swidden and paddy rice, albeit with indigenes cultivating much less of the latter.

12 Most NGOs were led by charismatic leaders who developed their cause by building on older networks and left-wing alliances from universities (University of the Philippines, Diliman etc) and previous civic organizations. Coordinating their efforts, they pooled technical expertise and collectively pressured government to consider human rights and livelihood agendas in park management. Such networks were often based on trust, friendship and obligation (cf. Hilhorst, 2000).

13 A Barangay is a traditional subdivision or municipality, akin to a neighborhood (urban) or village (rural).
the provincial DENR’s jurisdiction (SEP Act, 1992). Each agency’s unilateral claims over the national park made democratizing management next to impossible in Cabayugan.

*The struggle over Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park*

Conflict over the park came to a head in the early 1990s, with the City of Puerto Princesa seeking to displace the DENR as owner and manager of the park. This sub-section investigates this struggle by focusing on how each stakeholder’s political motives influence the outcomes of national and provincial resource governance policies for Palawan. At the outset, the City cited the PCSD and the SEP as the source of its authority14; the DENR used the NIPAS Act, which applied across the nation. As part of the national push to decentralize and fulfill donor commitments (see Thompson, 1995; World Bank, 1994), DENR officials negotiated with the City and PCSD to devolve the national park to the City Government under the SEP. Claims and

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14 To reiterate, the Palawan Council of Sustainable Development has legal jurisdiction to manage natural resources on Palawan Island, while the City Government sought to control park management with the Council in Puerto Princesa. The DENR’s management functions for the Province of Palawan were partly replaced by the Council and the City Government. Palawan’s own provincial government manages affairs under its own political jurisdiction, but coordinates activities with the Council and DENR.
counterclaims between each agency centered over the right to control the national park and forest resources on Palawan. The benefits were clear: the park generated revenue and status, bolstered political campaigns, and increased power over forests in Cabayugan.

In 1992, the politically powerful and “green” City Mayor, Edward Hagedorn, negotiated with DENR Secretary of the Environment Angel Alcala15 to sign an initial Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), which devolved management authority from the DENR to the City Government of Puerto Princesa.16 Without question, the Mayor’s broad political influence pushed the negotiations ahead in favour of the City Government (cf. Arquiza, 2003). Building on the SEP and Local Government Code, the MOA gave the City new powers to implement land tenure and livelihood projects paralleling those offered by the DENR (MOA, 1992: 2).17 Complicating matters, however, were that while the MOA stated that the City Government could take over “protection and maintenance of tree parks (and) greenbelts”, it specified that national parks remain under the auspices of the national government (MOA, 1992: 3). The initial MOA had omitted the park because of a policy oversight or misread. Failure to include the park in the MOA meant that the devolution was technically incomplete (MOA, 1992: 3). In response, a new supplementary MOA was signed by both politicians, compelling the DENR to transfer the national park’s “full management…and maintenance” to the City Government. The transfer included “all records, equipment, assets and facilities” funded under the Debt-for-Nature Swap (MOA, 1993: 2).18 As City Mayor, Hagedorn would soon have direct control over the national park.

Because of confusion over jurisdiction, a completely different Memorandum of Agreement was signed between the national DENR and the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD). The new agreement represented the final stage of the DENR devolving resource management authority to the PCSD, which, by legal default, gave the City political grease to retain the park.19 In support of the SEP, Secretary Alcala and Chairman of the PCSD, Salvador Socrates, signed a new overarching Memorandum of Agreement in order to clarify management authority in 1994.20 The “Agreement” was terminal and, at least in the local government’s eyes, represented the final stages of the DENR devolving management authority to the PCSD (and thus the City). Council staff could now offer legal and technical assistance to the City Government in its bid to manage the national park (see Table 1).

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15 A marine biologist by training, Dr. Angel Alcala served under Ramos in 1992 as the National Secretary of the Environment within the national DENR. Besides the fact that most national agencies were decentralized and the SEP devolved authority over resource management from the DENR to the City-PCSD on Palawan, the details of the politics behind the national park’s devolution remain obscure. Interviews suggest that the Mayor influenced Alcala into signing because illegal logging taking place in Cabayugan was reportedly linked to the DENR, that the signing of the MOA was contingent upon reciprocal or unilateral political support, and that both simply (amicably) agreed to sign the MOA. The likely answer for the MOAs being signed and devolution unfolding is the broader influence of decentralization in the Philippines, the SEP’s recognition of local government control over resource management on Palawan, and the initial and emerging political discontent over sharing power after signing the MOA.


17 The MOA had aligned the powers of the Local Government Code and the SEP to the City Government, as evidenced by the Council’s support.


19 The Palawan Council of Sustainable Development is currently situated under the Office of the President.

20 The overarching MOA was signed between both parties on December 29, 1994.
In contrast, DENR officials of Region IV clearly resented the loss of authority over Palawan’s Crown jewel, despite initially advocating for decentralization. The DENR’s position over the park remained steadfast. As one senior DENR official points out:

There was a move by the Mayor of the City Government to take hold of the park. But prior to that it was under supervision of the DENR — supervision, management, and even protection — everything! So there was a quick MOA drafted between the Secretary of the DENR and the City Mayor. I am not sure why this happened when it did!21

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21 Key Informant Interview, DENR Regional Office, Summer 2001.
Then as now, DENR officials at the national and provincial level believed that the City’s (and PCSD’s) use of the SEP could not override the state’s mandate of managing the park under the national protected areas system. Little would change, however. The SEP and PCSD supported the City; the DENR’s power was waning.

How would this ambiguous management relationship affect governance over land and forest resources locally? The Supplemental MOA and the SEP supported the Protected Area Management Board’s (PAMB) political structure, rather than the NIPAS Act as national authorities had hoped. The Mayor chaired the Board, the DENR’s Regional Executive Director became co-chair, and PCSD staff, NGO representatives, and community members filled the remaining seats. Since the PCSD, City and local NGOs held the balance of power, this silenced any opposition from the DENR such that the Board executed the City’s interests in governing the park. With the DENR’s voice fading, the Mayor appointed PAMB members that supported him politically.

The ability of the PCSD-City Protected Area Management Board to engage local resource users and NGO members in an equitable and efficient manner was rather mixed. On a positive front, the management board’s allocation of seats to indigenous rights organizations and resources users ensured them the opportunity to be involved in monthly meetings. One went to PANLIPI,22 a legal NGO for indigenous peoples, and another to NATRIPAL, an indigenous peoples’ federation.23 Barangay officials and forest guards who represented the migrant buffer zone village of Manturon held other seats; the politically prominent Brillantes Rodriguez24 represented the Tagbanua of Sugod Uno. Incorporating NGOs into the PAMB ensured that they mediated and conveyed livelihood concerns to the City Government and provincial DENR. A growing network of indigenous NGOs and environmental groups now served as political power brokers for the Tagbanua.25 At the same time, however, forest rangers and migrant Barangay officials (often paddy rice farmers from Cabayugan) voiced their opinions and concerns over the sustainability of paddy rice farming. These concerns tended to eclipse the concerns raised by the Tagbanua. The migrants were outspoken, held previous political positions, and often supported Mayor Hagedorn. The fact that Tagbanua only had one community representative and were less assertive and politically involved made it difficult for them to influence management outcomes in Cabayugan (see Keller, 1974).26

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22 A Manila-based NGO, PANLIPI stands for Tanggapan Panligal ng Katutubong Pilipino — The Legal Assistance Centre for Indigenous Filipinos. PANLIPI-Palawan’s lawyer wore two hats at the time as she also formed the new office of the Environmental Legal Assistance Centre. The local ELAC office was formed in 1994 and provides paralegal training and enforces different national/provincial environmental laws in and around Puerto Princesa Subterranean National Park.
23 A Palawan-based Peoples’ Organization, NATRIPAL is the federation of indigenous peoples on Palawan (the “United Tribes of Palawan”) and functions in the capacity of an NGO, except with a broad constituency of indigenous peoples. It is comprised of “local associations” in different indigenous communities, which were united in 1989 under NATRIPAL.
24 Brillantes’ brother, Jose Rodriquez from Sugod Uno, would later serve as the Tagbanua community representative in the PAMB.
25 In NATRIPAL’s case, it was well educated Tagbanua from south Palawan who worked on behalf of poorer Tagbanua, Batak, and Palawan indigenous peoples. At its satellite office, PANLIPI housed a prominent and outspoken attorney (and now City Councilor), who worked on land tenure and livelihood issues for indigenous peoples. Both worked together, but also faced organizational difficulties, which strained working relations.
26 Key Informant Interview, Executive Director, Palawan NGO Network Inc. Summer 2001.
The degree of representation and consultation was neither equal in number nor in perspective, with migrant Barangay officials and NGOs playing a formative role in implementing policies.26 The Board and its migrant majority (from Cabayugan) could screen all livelihood activities and projects in accordance to their political needs and the SEP’s (and NIPAS) zoning/management plans. Devolved management structures were now placing decision-making authority into the hands of the prominent elite of Cabayugan and more distant leaders of Puerto Princesa City. Rather than support local decision-making and livelihoods, key decision-makers pushed for the devolution of management authority for their own political benefit. Tagbanua needs and concerns were seldom incorporated into management planning.

Contested devolution, initial park expansion, and failed livelihood projects

In light of these mixed democratic results, what tensions existed between the desired and actual outcomes of devolved conservation among resource users in Cabayugan? Rather than optimize social and environmental outcomes, park managers unleashed a politically charged management platform that often neglected the livelihood needs of marginalized households, particularly Tagbanua and poorer migrants. This unfolded during two concurrent and overlapping management phases: the initial devolution of management (1992 onwards) and recent state efforts at recentralizing management (2000 onwards).

During the initial devolution, although the City’s Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) claimed to defend local needs and concerns, it soon issued new controls over swidden cultivation — the mainstay of Tagbanua livelihoods. While Tagbanua attended board meetings in hope of improving their livelihoods, City officials issued a sweeping ban over swidden just prior to expanding national park boundaries. These measures supported the Mayor’s strategy of merging environmentalist rhetoric with devolved governance structures, the bulwark of his “green” political campaign and tourism plan.

Backed by the SEP, the City and PCSD drafted two ordinances in 1993 and 1994 to regulate burns for swidden in order to bolster buffer zone enforcement. Despite NGO appeals, the Mayor and his rangers believed that issuing a “zero burning” ordinance could conserve “old growth” forest.27 As a result, Tagbanua farmers who had cleared, but not yet burnt and planted their swiddens, were left without harvests (McDermott, 2000). During the three-season ban, many Tagbanua grew hungry, while bolder migrants had subverted it by clearing and burning forest, whether primary or secondary forest (McDermott, 2000). Rather than conserve “old growth”, there was a loss in genetic diversity: variegated fallows regrew slowly from forest mosaics, rice seeds from locally-develop cultivars lost viability and/or were eaten, and farmers claimed losses of medicinal/ceremonial rice varieties (McDermott, 2000). Only by changing the earlier policy to one of “controlled burning”, and by providing Tagbanua with emergency rice, could the City offset the impact of the bans (Ordinance no. 318-93, 1993; Ordinance no. 110-94, 1994).

Building on this precedent, the Mayor-PAMB team consolidated political control over the national park by nominating it as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the mid-1990s (UNESCO, 1997). Although the initial application failed, because the park’s size of 5735 ha was too small for UNESCO’s conservation criteria, officials resubmitted their file with amended boundaries

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26 Key Informant Interview, Executive Director, Palawan NGO Network Inc. Winter 2004.
that tripled the size of the park (IUCN, 1993: 70). The process leading up to the new boundaries was fraught with political squabbling, with City and PCSD staff rejecting the DENR’s own draft of the boundaries.28 The park, they claimed, was under their jurisdiction (SPSRNP, 1993a).29 Despite sustained petitioning by the DENR that their boundaries were technically correct, the PCSD’s own redraft of the park boundaries served as the final precursor to “Presidential” Proclamation 212. The law thus sealed the expansion of the park.30 In time, these tensions produced new disputes over the spending of project funds in Cabayugan and the regional DENR office, which led to the closure of livelihood projects in Cabayugan (McDermott, 2000; SPSRNP, 1993b,c).31 Rather than become empowered, the politics of devolved management reduced livelihood security among Tagbanua. Swidden was criminalized and livelihood projects folded.

During the second phase, each agency’s claim of being “legitimate manager” set off new attempts to consolidate and recentralize control over the national park and its management platform. The City’s claims over the park were motivated by local management “success”, such as increases in tourism revenue, and its pending conservation status.32 Using the Mayor’s political networks, the City completed Presidential Proclamation no. 212, which expanded park boundaries to 22,202 ha for its now successful bid as World Heritage Site.33,34 The national DENR moved to position itself against Estrada’s signature, almost paradoxically, by suggesting that the NIPAS Act and Constitution of 1987 granted it authority over “national monuments”, which included national parks. First, the DENR surmised that the City’s proclamation, boundaries, and thus claims to the park were illegal because they had by-passed official procedure and, second, that the City’s renaming of the park after its municipality, Puerto Princesa City, (rather than St. Paul’s) was politically motivated. As one DENR official remarked in Manila35:

> There were no problems with our maps. We drew out lines to match the existing watershed and rivers. So, all these areas were protected to prevent the drying up of the underground river. So in December of 1999, I don’t know what happened, but there was a different proclamation that came out, called Proclamation 212 from the City Government, but that was not the Proclamation that was prepared by this office. The City

28 Key Informant Interview, Arturo Baltazar, Former Protected Area Superintendent, Summer 2002.
30 Proclamation no. “212” (PCSDs) An Amendment of Presidential Proclamation No. 835 dated March 26, 1971 which declared certain parcels of land in Puerto Princesa, Province of Palawan for National Park Purposes to be known as “St Paul Subterranean National Park” by modifying the Boundaries thereof to include Additional Areas.
31 For more details see Dressler (2005a) and McDermott (2000).
32 Visitor entrance fees were instituted at the park in 1993. Revenue from domestic and international tourists increased from P848,152 in 1994 to P2,248,890 in 2000. (SPSRNP, 2001). Unfortunately, any revenues coming from newly introduced park entrance fees supported (first generation) migrant forest rangers, rather than the subsistence needs of Tagbanua.
33 In Proclamation no. 212, the park was renamed from St. Paul Subterranean River National Park to Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park.
34 How the President’s signature got on the bill, while both agencies feuded over the national park, remains open to speculation. What is well known is that Hagedorn and Estrada were close political allies.
35 Key Informant Interview, DENR Regional Office, Manila, Spring 2001.
government prepared another Proclamation with their own wordings and we don’t know how it got into the hands of the President and how he was able to sign the Proclamation, when it didn’t go through our Department first. We learned only about that when it came out. Our central office, the PAWB, was calling us and asked: “Do you know about the Proclamation?” No, we said. They asked, were you the ones who prepared the proclama-
tion? And we, of course, said no! Because the documents that we prepared first go through the Office of the Secretary. We were at a loss.

Apart from the political rhetoric, senior officials soon intervened with a barrage of political strictures on why it was necessary to recentralize park management. After Estrada had signed the City’s Proclamation no. 212, Environment Secretary, Antonio Cerilles, wrote to the City Mayor on May 2, 2000 that his office was recentralizing authority by unilaterally revoking the MOA (1993). Mayor Hagedorn responded negatively, suggesting that the park remain with the City because of local management “success,” the President’s recognition of the park, and the park’s status of World Heritage Site. The DENR’s push to revoke the Supplemental MOA (1993) only subsided after Cerilles’ staff met with the Hagedorn to discuss the poten-
tial of co-managing the national park, which the City eventually dismissed. The negative fallout of ambiguous managerial roles and livelihood initiatives soon transpired locally.

The suboptimal outcomes of decentralized management

Toward the late 1990s, political feuds continued to complicate and derail devolved conserva-
tion efforts in Cabayugan proper. To include the park in the Integrated Protected Areas Strat-
egy, the provincial DENR office executed a “Regional Special Order” in order to set up a national management team. The team, consisting of a DENR “Park Superintendent”, two park rangers, and one administrative officer, managed the park under the NIPAS Act, as earlier memos had specified. The results were predictable. Two agencies with overlapping mandates appointed their own park managers to enforce the park at different zones with contrasting methods. The DENR’s park manager and rangers managed the newly expanded outer boundary area (22,202 ha) and the City Government’s staff managed the original core zone (3901 ha), as specified in the Supplemental MOA (1993) (see Fig. 3). The DENR’s park manager and rangers were deputized to make legal arrests, while City rangers could only issue verbal reprimands and confiscate goods. Devolved management thus produced a two-tier enforcement system, situated inside and outside the national park, which extended each agency’s control over local access to forest resources.

Moreover, each agency tried to garner local support in order to extend its control over the park, a political strategy that sustained patron—client relations. For example, the DENR set out to enroll prominent Tagbanua in livelihood programs (i.e., Community-based Forest

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36 “Letter from Environment Secretary Antonio Cerilles stating that RA 7586 mandated the creation of a National PAMB and an indicating of the DENR’s interest in revoking the MOA of 1992, Dated May 2, 2000.”

37 Memo from CENRO Officer, Summer 1999, Puerto Princesa City.

38 As it stands, a Department of Justices decision (1994) that the SEP Law and PCSD governed forest resources on Palawan provided independent legal support to the City’s control over park management (DOJ Opinion no. 90, 1994).

39 “Letter from Atty. Agustin Roca Mora, City Administrator, to Iverne Reyes, OIC CENRO, DENR, PPC. Dated July 6, 2000”.

40 “(ca. mid-1990s, An Official Memo circulated by the Undersecretary for Legal and Legislative Affairs and Attached Agencies. Subject: Clarification regarding the creation of PAMB for St. Paul (now Puerto Princesa) Subterranean National Park and other Protected Areas in Palawan. Puerto Princesa City, Palawan.”
Management), in hope they could convince other community members to participate and invest in the project. Encouraging locals to invest in the project consolidated the DENR’s political leverage over local users and forest resources. Despite this, however, the national park remained beyond its reach.

Overlapping functions and jurisdictional conflicts now shaped how “devolved” conservation affected Tagbanua livelihoods. Because of competing park laws and management priorities, buffer zones were demarcated within the newly expanded national park. The City and its managers aligned themselves with the Strategic Environmental Plan’s management zones. The law’s zoning system, known as the Environmentally Critical Areas Network, prohibited agriculture and all commercial resource uses in the “Core Zone.” The “traditional use zones” engulfed ancestral lands to “stabilize” traditional activities, such as swidden, on marginal lands, and “Multiple Use” zones wrapped around these areas to accommodate commercial agriculture on prime lands (see SPSRNP, 1995). The NIPAS Act’s zones were similar to and overlapped with the SEP’s zoning system in lowland and upland areas of the national park (NIPAS Act, 1992). Despite the NIPAS Act, expanding and managing park boundaries as buffer zones still fell (legally) under the SEP. Both agencies managed different areas of those zones containing traditional and commercial land uses that fell within their jurisdiction.

Besides the older core zone, two main zones were actively managed. The first, multiple use zones, allowed permanent agriculture and catered to migrant farmers. Few Tagbanua occupied

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41 Note that the “core zone” is defined primarily on the basis of elevation (above 1000 m A.S.L.), with some additional area incorporated by supplementary criteria. Maximum resource protection is mandated within the core zone.
and cultivated in this zone. The second, traditional use zones, stipulated that land uses retain dominant forest cover in the uplands, and were directed at Tagbanua. This zoning restriction permitted, for example, rattan collection and limited swidden cultivation, but rarely supported permanent agriculture. The fact that this zone included little irrigable land, and that only rattan collection and swidden was permitted, kept Tagbanua livelihoods “traditional” by hindering them from cultivating intensive, “fixed plot” agriculture (e.g., paddy rice).

Roughly two years after the ancestral domain claim was awarded in 1997, foreign staff and local NGO representatives working for the City drafted a management plan for Puerto Princesa Subterranean River National Park (PPSRNP, 1999). The management plan incorporated programs and projects in (the SEP and NIPAS defined) park buffer zones that were broadly divided into forest and non—forest-based interventions. While programs claimed to support the livelihoods of migrants and Tagbanua equally, livelihood projects in traditional and multiple use zones sustained unequal distributions of wealth and power. In traditional use buffer zones, only a few program initiatives advanced rattan harvesting and agro-forestry as a way to restructure the livelihoods of Tagbanua. As enshrined in the domain claim’s management plan, indigenous “claimants” participated in livelihood projects on the condition of sustainability, which offered few political and economic opportunities (cf. Bryant, 2002). In multiple use zones, projects supported migrant paddy rice by maintaining nutrient inputs, hybrid seeds and market outlets for rice sales.

Prior to the park’s expansion as a World Heritage Site, the Tagbanua learned that their ancestral domain claim and livelihoods would be subject to “traditional use” zones (SPSRNP, 1998). Defined by the management plan, these zones overlapped with the DENR-managed CADC, the NIPAS’ zoning, and the PCSD and City’s zoning schemes. While the DENR understood that the Tagbanua could extract commercial resources within the domain claim, confining the domain claim to this zone meant that only low-income yielding activities were permissible. Rattan harvesting, for example, generated few opportunities to acquire capital because of substantial debts incurred during the harvests. Rattan collecting required few capital inputs, since middlemen (and sometimes women) often processed and/or transported poles to the city. Any opportunities to earn a return on investment went to outsiders supplying capital (McDermott, 2000).

Most projects offered by the City’s Protected Area Management Board targeted “traditional” livelihoods without offering many productive assets. Such projects simply sustained the status quo or worsened “capital poor” livelihoods — as if to keep Tagbanua traditional. In particular, since the programs offered Tagbanua few fixed assets, such as secure land title, farmers without collateral failed to secure loans to purchase flat lands. Participation in “low-capital” projects that supported forest-based livelihoods kept Tagbanua cultivating the unproductive lands they were displaced to in the 1960s and 1970s. With few agricultural inputs, most swidden cultivated on undulating terrain yielded limited surplus rice and revenue for household reinvestments, such as for their children’s education. In fact, a family’s income barely covered the purchase of food and consumer durables and cash savings seldom covered the unforeseen costs of emergencies, such as sickness or death. As one Tagbanua elder states:

No one from the [park] staff made the effort to come here to inform me.

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43 Key Informant Interview, Thomas Madarcos, Martape, Spring 2004.
They have not balanced their objectives. They have not made the rules fairly as they push conservation over our culture. I mean the only way we can access the park is by introducing ourselves to the governor in the City!

…people like me who live far away don’t receive any benefits from projects. Only those who have studied get the benefits, but people like me who have not [studied], receive few benefits.

They’ve widened the park, before the park was smaller. But I haven’t noticed a real difference. My livelihood hasn’t been affected since there are no livelihood projects here [further in the forest].

Portions of the buffer zone covering migrant farmland allowed for multiple uses, which imposed far fewer restrictions on their livelihoods. Because most “multiple use” areas contained the paddy fields of migrant farmers, the projects in these zones supported the expansion of wet rice production. Migrants already benefiting from paddy rice cultivation by claiming flat lands, farm inputs, and income from rice sales, could now expand production (up to three croppings per year) through livelihood projects and associations that supported reinvestments in production. Most farmers, for example, had organized themselves around PAMB-endorsed associations that offered them loans for the purchase of mechanized farm implements (hand tractors, water pumps, etc) and parcels of flat land that directly enhanced production. Land title and other assets offered collateral for securing and reinvesting loans into paddy farming.

Compared to the Tagbanua, then, if migrant farmers could use loans to purchase capital and produce surplus rice for sale at the National Food Board, they had greater choice in how to re-invest in agriculture and the household unit. Many savings, for example, went to support their children’s primary and secondary school education. Migrant offspring thus had fewer difficulties securing tertiary employment in the city or wage-based work with the park’s livelihood projects. As a result, while such households still opt to cultivate paddy rice, many work in small-scale businesses and/or the service sector in order to diversify production — an option few Tagbanua can afford.

The above analysis suggests that considerable tension now exists between the desired and actual outcomes of decentralization among migrants and Tagbanua farmers. State officials clearly failed to realize their political and economic objectives through decentralizing the management of national parks, particularly on Palawan. Rather than support “efficient and equitable” conservation, the devolution of management authority from the DENR to City Government created overlapping and ambiguous programs that tapped into and supported unequal terms of production. Few optimal social outcomes have surfaced. Already marginalized and vulnerable, livelihood projects in specific land use zones further ostracized indigenous peoples by supporting older processes of control, investment, and reproduction among wealthier migrant households. Transferring management authority to the City and local organizations has done little to support indigenous peoples’ use of productive resources for more profitable agriculture. Without access to productive capital and suitable land, they remain in the same marginal position as during the era of centralized park management.

44 If a farmer has sufficient collateral, such as private land holdings, he or she may receive credit from farmers’ co-operatives in the form of cash loans. Loans range from P3000 to as much as P35,000 and are used for capital “build up.” Migrant farmers indicated that they used the cash to purchase mechanized farm equipment, such as a threshers, rice mills, hand tractors, and/or water pumps.
Conclusion

The fact that biodiversity conservation initiatives often reflect national or even global interests, but impose limitations on local access to land and resources is well-documented (Peluso, 1993; Roth, 2004; Slater, 2002; Wilshusen, Brechin, Fortwangler, & West, 2002). For decades, centralized, top–down conservation has, in fact or in perception, reduced resource access and livelihood security, producing conflicts that make conservation inequitable, inefficient and unsustainable. Decentralized protected areas management and devolved programs, often taking the form of community-based conservation, intend to redress these problems by promoting local support for national conservation agendas by including resource users in decision-making. Apparently, encouraging direct participation in decision-making can ensure optimal social and environmental outcomes, that is, legitimate management that empowers local users to conserve resources they depend on most (Berkes, 2004; Kellert et al., 2000). This paper began by asking whether decentralization of parks management and devolution of authority over natural resources can fulfill its stated goals in light of the political complexity situated at different institutional scales. We considered how the political motives of different actors influence the governance objectives of political decentralization; how the political process of decentralization affects devolved governance over natural resources; and how the outcomes of this process affects local livelihoods.

Drawing on the Palawan case study, we demonstrate that broader decentralization and direct devolution of power does not necessarily lead to greater efficiency, equity and sustainability in the management of natural resources. Rather than optimizing social outcomes, decentralization supported the political and economic authority of local elite, exacerbated ethnic polarizations, and further marginalized indigenous peoples, undercutting rather than supporting their livelihoods. Conflicting claims over national park management precipitated political power struggles among politicians at various institutional scales, from local officials to state secretaries, and perpetuated power imbalances.

Regarding our three objectives, first, the political motives of different institutional actors directly influenced the broader governance objectives of political decentralization on Palawan Island. After the DENR decentralized management (phase one), the City Government of Puerto Princesa received and struggled to retain a greater degree of political and economic power over the national park. City officials’ use of devolved decision-making structures ensured access to a range of political opportunities and new partnerships with NGO leaders. Because the City, PCSD, and NGOs coordinated management in Cabayugan, and park staff and NGO field officers were often migrants, management decisions and benefits remained with them rather than Tagbanua. The power differentials prevalent between each layer of government soon defined the type, degree of progress, and levels of involvement in local governance structures.

Second, the ambiguity of broader decentralization processes created conflicting systems of devolved governance over land and forests. With park management now devolved, duplicate management structures surfaced in which political tensions and uneven membership polarized regulatory decisions and outcomes in favour of the City Government. The multi-stakeholder management board, for example, seldom acted upon Tagbanua livelihood concerns. Even with NGO intermediaries, government decision-makers still shaped resource access and use in favour of migrants and their political leaders. Moreover, the DENR and City Government’s lack of political will to harmonize management policy and zones, created confusion over who
regulated and “supported” livelihood projects in Cabayugan. In areas where zones overlapped, each agency claimed primacy over the other and attempted to advance their own conservation agendas, livelihood projects, and forest-use policies. Neither outcome represents legitimate decision-making nor sustained political empowerment.

Third, and most importantly, the outcomes of decentralization materialized as ambiguous zones and livelihood programs for the Tagbanua of Cabayugan. Fearing loss of regional authority, the DENR’s relentless efforts to recentralize park management (phase two) from the City sustained the power struggle over the national parks and its programs. Persistent conflicts over institutional authority limited the overall success of livelihood projects among local residents. In particular, livelihood projects were divided along management zones that supported those agricultural practices — paddy rice and swidden cultivation — that exacerbated differentiation among migrants and Tagbanua. As a result, rather than reducing local disparities, such projects exacerbated unequal livelihood conditions. Migrants who were involved in projects supporting capital accumulation could reinvest in more lucrative paddy farming, while Tagbanua received support from projects that catered to traditional livelihoods, which required few inputs and limited returns on investment. Most projects offered livelihood support that was split unevenly along ethnic and spatial lines.

Examining the broader political motives and processes that drive decentralization at multiple institutional scales is crucial to properly interpret the relative success of social and environmental outcomes at the local level. Seldom can one approach to decentralization produce consistently optimal outcomes, whether social, political or environmental in nature. The political interplay within and between the national, provincial and local level is mutually constitutive and reconfigures the initial expectations of decentralization. This is particularly true of the often essentialized conditions of legitimate governance and political empowerment. The ways in which practitioners interpret and implement decentralization must remain nuanced and flexible in order for outcomes to better reflect and support local circumstances.

Although decentralization should offer resource users adequate control over and sufficient representation in decision-making structures in order to shape resource access and use, the institutions that support management must adjust to the contrasting needs of communities. Adjusting management policy so that it reflects political struggles and the conditions of local institutions (e.g., insecure tenure) might allow local users to benefit from and place greater faith in decentralization (Ribot, 2004: 53). Otherwise, personalities, political infighting, technical errors, and ensuing misinformation — the messy reality of decentralization — may render the transfer of management authority to local levels inequitable, inefficient and unsustainable. On Palawan Island, the provincial DENR and City Government’s use of decentralization reform to wrest control over the national park only strengthened their political and economic interests and undermined livelihood support, casting doubts on the benefits of community-based conservation.

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