# Future-proofing our last frontier  | Inquirer Opinion

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Palawan, the country’s last frontier, deserves all the protection it could get against all sorts of environmental threats that endanger its unique flora and fauna. These are the same threats that can also jeopardize the main tourism draw of the white-sand beaches and dive spots in central and northern Palawan.

Thus, the news that Southeast Asia’s most biologically diverse and resource-rich area is being future-proofed by an unprecedented local government resolution that bans the issuance of new mining permits for the next 50 years is laudable.

The Inquirer reported that the province, “a Unesco ‘biosphere reserve’ known for its diverse flora and fauna, has become a hotbed for mining as the national government seeks to widen its market share for minerals like nickel, a key component of electric vehicle batteries.”

To remedy the situation, Palawan’s Sangguniang Panlalawigan (provincial council) on March 5 unanimously approved an ordinance imposing a 50-year moratorium on new mining operations, which was a reflection of the collective wisdom of Palaweños. The moratorium covers all applications for mining agreements, mining exploration permits and other financial or technical agreements.

## Economic benefits

Applications for renewing or expanding mining licenses are prohibited for 25 years, but existing mines can continue as long as they don’t increase their production or move into new areas.

Eleven mines have been operating in Palawan, but the Inquirer report noted the locals’ increasing pushback against new applications for mining projects, “with environmental groups and activists pointing to effects ranging from deforestation and flooding to the displacement of indigenous peoples.”

Proponents often frame the issue in terms of mining’s economic benefits to the country. Admittedly, the position of the Chamber of Mines of the Philippines cannot be ignored. For instance, the country holds 4.8 million metric tons of nickel reserves, which is the sixth largest in the world, bigger than China’s 4.2 million metric tons and Canada’s 2.2 million metric tons.

Demand for nickel is on the rise, especially from the steel-making industry and the renewable sector that produces electric vehicle and the battery market.

## Responsible mining

Palawan is home to the second-largest nickel mine in the country. Thus, the Chamber of Mines has valid reasons to object to the long moratorium, as it would also limit “the country’s ability to plan and strategize about its mineral wealth at a time when the global demand for critical minerals is rising,” it said.

It argued that the Philippine government “has a responsibility to the people to develop its mineral resources responsibly for the good of the many. Palawan cannot and should not limit the national government’s ability to do so.”

The chamber also warned that environmental concerns could be overblown given the existing laws that already provide stringent safeguards.

There’s no denying that mining is an essential economic activity, and responsible mining is allowed in other parts of the country.

But from a moral perspective, mining in Palawan is problematic. Palawan Gov. Dennis Socrates himself supported the mining moratorium because of its political and moral implications. “Mining is really a moral issue,” said Socrates. Although mining is allowed by the national government, the decision of the local government unit (LGU) can override the policy in accordance with the Philippine Mining Act of 1995, which requires the endorsement of the LGU for any mining operation to be allowed.

## Ecotourism powerhouse

The moral dimension of mining is centered around sustainability, which leads to the next argument against mining in Palawan. To put it simply, sustainability means ensuring that future generations can continue to enjoy Palawan in terms of its beauty and biodiversity even with the current pace of human intrusions and resource exploitation.

Opening up portions of the province to more mining operations will also put its reputation as an ecotourism powerhouse in Southeast Asia at risk, potentially jeopardizing its overall status as the Philippines’ main tourism attraction.

We therefore support the call for full implementation of the ban, which is a laudable decision by Palawan that will ensure the sustainability and protection of its endemic flora and fauna, and survival of communities. Palawan’s pristine and fragile nature cannot be jeopardized by major developments, which is why it is crucial to ban new mining explorations and operations.

By banning mining in other areas in Palawan for 50 years, the province can fully embrace ecotourism as both a source of sustainable livelihood and an environmental protection measure.