In recent years, UPLB has successfully fought attempts of certain organizations to make the University cede control of parts or all of the Makiling Forest Reserve (MFR) to some interest groups. UPLB’s position is founded on the urgent need to conserve and preserve one of the few remaining forest reserves in the country and the only one within a radius of 65 km from Metro Manila.

In 1963, the MFR was placed under the administration and management of the University of the Philippines, by virtue of Republic Act No. 3523, for the University to carry out a program of public education and information in forestry, with the College of Forestry as the central coordinating agency. After more than two decades of faithful stewardship, the University was disturbed in 1987 to learn that Executive Order No. 224, signed by President Corazon C. Aquino, vested in the National Power Corporation the complete jurisdiction, control and regulation of watershed areas including the Makiling Forest. In acknowledgment of the University’s ascendancy in the preservation and conservation of the MFR, the NPC in 1987 signed an agreement with UPLB for the latter to administer and manage the Makiling Watershed. Fortunately, in 1989, the control, jurisdiction and administration of the MFR was once again vested in UPLB by virtue of Republic Act 6967. These facts show that the intention of the legislature has consistently been to place the whole Makiling Forest Reserve under the full control and administration of UPLB.

It is regrettable that the House of Representatives is now poised to enact House Bill No. 3005, entitled “AN ACT VESTING THE BOY SCOUTS OF THE PHILIPPINES (BSP) WITH CONTROL, JURISDICTION AND ADMINISTRATION OF A PARCEL OF LAND LOCATED AT MT. MAKILING, LOS BAÑOS, LAGUNA TO BE KNOWN AS THE BOY SCOUTS OF THE PHILIPPINES (BSP) JAMBOREE SITE, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES,” introduced by Representative Del R. de Guzman of the lone district of Marikina.

This is not the first time that the BSP has undertaken efforts to gain control of the portion of the MFR which was used as a venue for the 1959 World Boy Scouts Jamboree. In 1959, BSP President and Chief Scout Jose B. Vargas requested then President Carlos P. Garcia for a 300-hectare camp site to be reserved for BSP by Executive Proclamation. The request was not favorably considered by the then Parks and Wildlife Office (the office mandated by Republic Act 826 of 1952 to oversee the then Makiling National Park), commenting that Mt. Makiling is a reserved park to be conserved and protected for the benefit and enjoyment of the Filipino people. The same office further declared that by law, Mt. Makiling National Park becomes an institution by itself and in no case should its area be impaired or reduced.

On three critical occasions, the honorable members of the House of Representatives and the Senate recognized the validity of the reasons forwarded by the leadership of the University by rejecting a series of attempts for BSP to take control of a portion of land in the MFR through House Bill No. 10549 in 1964, Senate Bill No. 685 in 1964 and House Bill 3441 in 1998. These reasons still stand and there is no reason for believing that the same cannot be raised against H.B. No. 3005.

More than ever, we must all unite behind the move to oppose this incursive attempt that will set a precedent and make the MFR vulnerable to similar moves from other groups, and will thus further threaten the forest resources from which UPLB as an educational institution and Calamba,
Los Baños, Bay and Sto. Tomas, Batangas, as well as Metro Manila and nearby municipalities, have directly benefited.

It is urgent for us to know the stakes involved in preserving the integrity of the MFR, and to unite behind the campaign to convince our lawmakers to reject H.B. No. 3005.

1. The MFR is a national heritage and one of the few remaining forest reserves in the country. There are 2,000 species of moss, hundreds of species of fungi and algae, 45 species of mammals, 181 species of birds, 65 species of reptiles and 22 species of amphibian in the MFR. More are still left to be discovered and identified. It is therefore a living evidence of the richness of the country’s biodiversity, decidedly among the remaining few, considering the rate at which our forests are destroyed. Because of this, we must all unite behind the efforts of UPLB to preserve and conserve this rich biodiversity.

The MFR is recognized by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature as one of the Philippines’ 18 centers of plant diversity; by the DENR and Conservation International as an extremely high biodiversity conservation priority area; by the Haribon Foundation and BirdLife International as an important bird area and key conservation site; and by the Department of Tourism as one of the country’s 32 key ecotourism sites.

As the country’s premier academic institution for the conservation of the country’s natural resources, UPLB is the most qualified entity to pursue the purpose for which the MFR has been set aside. By parceling out the MFR through H.B. No. 3005, the MFR will become fragmented, a major cause of loss of habitat and destruction of natural resources in the country. Parceling out the MFR would run counter to effective conservation strategies that uphold integration and holistic management as pointed out in the Master Plan for the MFR promulgated in 1996 by E.O. No. 349 of President Fidel V. Ramos.

The integrated and holistic management of the whole MFR is best achieved when there is a single institution primarily tasked to lead. When the management of portions of the MFR is entrusted to different organizations by virtue of ownership, the whole idea of integrated and holistic management will be difficult, if not impossible to achieve. It is therefore imperative that the entire MFR be administered by UP Los Baños, the nearest single agency which has the expertise and technical capability to carry out such task.

2. The MFR is a critical watershed area supplying the water needs of Calamba City, Los Baños, and Bay towns in Laguna and Sto. Tomas and Tanauan towns in Batangas. The watersheds in the MFR cannot be fragmented without seriously threatening the inherent watershed conditions within as well as those in the adjacent areas.

These places are decidedly among the most populated places outside Metro Manila because of the presence of industrial parks, educational, and research and development institutions in their vicinities. Opening up even a small part (1.34%) of the MFR to an organization that does not have the expertise to maintain it will threaten the MFR’s watershed areas and endanger the sources, not only of our domestic water supply but also the water supply that sustains agriculture and aquaculture, the tourism industry and the industrial parks in the area. This will mean rationed water for the residences like what is happening in Metro Manila, and the loss of revenue and jobs generated by numerous industrial parks and swimming resorts situated around Mt. Makiling. It will also deprive our farmlands and fishponds of precious life-sustaining water, and further diminish our ability to produce our own food.
The MFR master plan recognizes the forest reserve as composed of closely interrelated ecosystems that are intertwined with other systems, and is therefore affected by and in turn affects the status of these other systems. The basic approach adopted in the sustainable development and management of the MFR is one that is integrated and holistic. While the MFR can be divided into several watershed zones and distinct land uses, the zones are intertwined with each other. Anything that happens on a particular zone is bound to impact adversely on the other zones and on other ecological features of the MFR.

The BSP Jamboree area is a portion of the Molawin subwatershed of Mt. Makiling. It covers portions of the headwaters and highland areas of a smaller microwatershed, the Saran microwatershed. Its water source is a spring located outside the BSP premises within the Dampalit subwatershed in the MFR. It is adjacent to natural forests and plantation areas. Its micro-climate is enhanced by the surrounding forested areas and plantations and is linked to other natural ecotourism sites such as Pook ni Maria Makiling, National Arts Center and the Makiling Botanic Gardens. Therefore, segregating the BSP Jamboree area from the management unit that is the entire MFR will have serious adverse ramifications on the whole forest reserve.

3. The preservation of the watershed areas in the MFR is vital towards the development of hydro-geothermal power. RA 6967 also vested the exclusive jurisdiction, administration and complete control of the MFR in the UPLB, further directing the same “to preserve watershed areas in the forest reserve for the development of hydro-geothermal power in coordination with the National Power Corporation, provided such development will not endanger the forest reserve and prejudice its purpose as a training laboratory.” The Mt. Makiling geothermal reserve contributes significantly to the Luzon electricity power grid. The sustained operations of NPC’s geothermal power plants are dependent on a well-protected and preserved watershed.

4. The Makiling forest does not only produce some of the air that we breathe, it is also one huge sink that, by absorbing pollutants and carbon, improves the quality of the air, and regulates the temperature and relative humidity in the city/towns surrounding Mt. Makiling. Air quality levels in the big urbanized areas, Metro Manila included, are below World Health Organization standards. Heavy air pollution causes respiratory ailments, if not life-threatening diseases caused by toxic gases.

The protective mantle of trees and other vegetation covering the bulk of the MFR provides a tempered environment, also amplifying the forest reserve’s role in mitigating the effects of global warming in the area. Moreover, as increased industrialization brings with it the concomitant effects of atmospheric, soil and noise pollution, the intrinsic value of the MFR as a giant sponge that absorbs toxic atmospheric pollutants and as a buffer for noise abatement will become more important than ever.

4. The MFR protects the people in the surrounding city/towns from catastrophic flashfloods reminiscent of those that happened in Ormoc, Leyte in 1991; Lilo-an, Leyte in 2003; and in Umiray, Aurora, and in Real and Infanta, Quezon in 2004. This is largely because the University through the College of Forestry and Natural Resources (CFNR) has been steadfast in its mission to preserve and conserve Mt. Makiling. Matched by its capability and commitment, the CFNR has established a track record of effectively managing the reserve, a track record that cannot be surpassed by any other institution in the country. Opening up the MFR by assigning jurisdiction of a parcel of land within it to a group which does not have such a track record will lead to unmitigated incursion, such as squatting, and the cutting of trees to give way to the construction of buildings.
Proof of this is that the BSP violated its lease agreement with UPLB by allowing squatters to take over portions of the subject area. A court decision has ordered the eviction of squatters from the leased area, but the BSP management has not been able to implement the order. Instead, it has allowed more illegal settlers to set up residence in its area of jurisdiction, bringing the number from 17 in 1990 to 85 in 2004. Moreover, in wanton disregard of the lease agreement, the BSP set up permanent structures without getting the permission of UPLB, and located one such structure beyond the area that it was allowed to lease.

The performance of the BSP in controlling forest occupancy reveals its ineffectiveness and delinquency as a forest manager. This performance failed to show that BSP is capable and willing to deal with its forest occupancy problem in a manner consistent with the sustainable development of the MFR. The BSP can never question the better right of the University over the MFR or even portions of it.

5. The MFR is an important resource supporting research and development activities in the University, not only in forestry but also of lesser species from which we derive food, medicine, essential oils and handicraft raw materials. The forest harbors not only forest tree species from which timber may be derived, it also shelters under its canopy lesser species such as mushrooms and other food sources, medicinal plants, plants and trees that give us essential oils and raw materials for our handicraft industry. UPLB has undertaken and continues to undertake research on these lesser forest species as our needs as a people can no longer be supported by our traditional sources. The importance of these lesser forest species, which are veritable sources of sustenance, doubly emphasizes the need to preserve and conserve our forests.

Researches in forest management conducted in the MFR have been used as model undertakings that other institutions have replicated in forest reserves that they have been assigned to administer. Under the management of UPLB, the MFR was selected as a model case for forest management by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

6. The MFR is a training laboratory for the students in forestry and other relevant fields. Our students go on field studies in the MFR, which serve as valuable sources of information and experience as they venture into the real world of protecting our forest and natural resources. These field studies expose them to different ecosystems, the understanding and appreciation of which has enabled them to propose measures to conserve and preserve the country’s rich biodiversity.

It is not only the UPLB students who benefit from the MFR as a training laboratory but faculty members, researchers and students of other universities in the Philippines who periodically visit the MFR to learn lessons in conservation and preservation of forest and other natural resources. These faculty members, researchers and students come from colleges and universities from as far north as Cagayan Valley, Cordillera, and Ilocos Region, and as far south as Bicol, Samar and Leyte. Mt. Makiling is also an important field laboratory regarded by scientists as one of the best-known biological areas in the Philippines owing much to its long scientific history.

The BSP is currently using the area known as the Jamboree Site under a lease agreement with UPLB that is working well between the two parties. The lease agreement is still in force, and to abrogate this lease contract via H.B. No. 3005 will in effect impair the obligation of contracts, which runs against the Constitution.
H.B. No. 3005 enunciates that the BSP needs a permanent home and that giving the BSP control of the area will give flesh not only to the presidential policy initiative of then President Garcia but also in recognition of the role this particular camp site has played in local and international scouting history. It must be noted, however, that for close to fifty years now, the former 10th World Boy Scouts Jamboree site has been a “home” of the BSP and UPLB does not have the intention of putting an end to this.

To serve the occasional camping needs of the BSP, which is not even prejudiced by the existing lessor-lessee relationship with UP Los Baños, cannot supersede the more critical need to preserve and conserve the integrity of the MFR to promote public welfare and national interest. Parceling out the MFR will compromise the conservation and preservation efforts of the University, threaten our way of life, put the health and lives of our people at risk, and endanger the rich biodiversity of the area. H.B. No. 3005 will initiate the break-up and fragmentation of the MFR and its administration and management, which will be prejudicial to national interest.

In view of the reasons cited above, the University of the Philippines Los Baños maintains an unyielding stand that the H.B. No. 3005 is not necessary and will only derail our efforts towards preserving the integrity of the MFR and the sustainable development and management of the same.

If you want the MFR to continually provide the life support system very crucial in this highly disturbed environment we live in, support the position of the UPLB administration and join the campaign to convince our lawmakers to reject H.B. No. 3005. Take a stand and write the House of Representatives to reject H.B. No. 3005.

Office of the Chancellor
University of the Philippines Los Baños