Swidden agriculture has a long history of being criminalised by state agencies and civil societies in the Global South. In the Philippines, in particular, swidden has been criminalised and castigated as a ‘backwards’ and ‘destructive’ practice to forests and other natural resources since Spanish and American colonial times—wherein the rotational nature of swidden and extensive use of fire are viewed to rapidly clear and degrade forests. Yet, swidden agriculture, and the use of fire, persists. Often neglected in the analysis of the rural livelihoods and agrarian change, this study examines the contrasting values, representations, management and uses of fire among indigenous swidden farmers, as well as state and civil-society actors who govern forests in the uplands of Palawan Island, the Philippines. Drawing on Kull’s (2004) ‘fire politics’ framework, we describe the socio-cultural and economic functions of swidden fire across two main indigenous groups – the Tagbanua and Pala’wan of central and southern Palawan—whose livelihoods and landscapes are increasingly influenced by varied forms of green governance and associated enclosures. Informed by two decades of fieldwork among swidden farmers, we explore why swidden fire remains criminalised by state, NGO and private sector actors, as well as how and why the indigenous poor continue to burn their forests despite decades of forest governance suppressing swidden fire. Through an ethno-ecological lens, we show in detail how firing practices remain integral to the livelihoods of poor farmers, providing the most efficient and effective means to clear debris, nourish soils, produce crops and nurture custom. We show that while forest governance policies ably construct the ‘kaingin (slash-and-burn) problem’, significant disjuncture exists between stated objectives and outcomes, with tolerance and leniency toward firing being the local norm rather than exception. Overall, this study highlights local level understandings of fire that are crucial in engaging existing inequities in forest and land management in the Philippines, and broader views of the ‘destructive’ nature of swidden fire, inherent within global and sub-national interpretations of the ‘green economy’.