

# PUBLIC PERCEPTION TOWARDS LANDSCAPE OF CONFLICT: A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON HISTORIC BATTLEFIELD PRESERVATION IN MALAYSIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Landscapes of conflict in Malaysia are currently under constant threats from the urbanization process and often permanently lose its historical characteristics. Besides the need for appropriate legislation to protect this type of cultural resources, public understanding, and awareness regarding the battlefield landscape's importance may also contribute towards its future existence. This study employed an on-site questionnaire survey to identify the public perception of the historic battlefield landscape. A total of 60 respondents participated in the survey conducted at the Muzium Tentera Darat (Army Museum) in Port Dickson. The survey offers positive insights into the level of public awareness, essential elements, and design recommendations for future battlefield landscape preservation. The study also revealed that religious and mystical phenomena typically associated with deadly spaces are not public issues.*

**Keywords:** perception, battlefield landscape, the landscape of conflict (LOC), preservation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since men's first existence, our landscape has been continuously embedded with various physical conflicts caused by our desires to compete and overcome survival challenges. Our instinct is to defend or protect, for instance, our ideology or well-being when it was challenged or put under threats. In general, the landscape of conflicts (LOC) can be conceptually divided into two main categories: "man versus nature" and "man versus man." The first category typically refers to continuous human endeavors to conquer and control natural resources to meet our specific needs or objectives. "Man versus man," on the other hand, involves human struggles to accommodate their tangible and intangible differences and could lead to highly destructive results such as wars.

Besides, LOC can also be regarded as cultural landscapes. The Cultural Landscapes Foundation (TCLF), for example, defines cultural landscapes as "landscapes that have been affected, influenced, or shaped by human involvement. A cultural landscape can be associated with a person or event. Collectively, cultural landscapes are works of art, narratives of culture, and expressions of regional identity" (The Cultural Landscape Foundation, 2018). TCLF divided cultural landscapes into four categories: (i) Designed Landscapes, (ii) Ethnographic Landscapes, (iii) Historic sites - cultural landscapes significant for their association with a historic event, activity, or person, and (iv) Vernacular Landscapes. For example, in the case of a historic LOC, if such landscapes were consciously designed for defense, it would fall into both "designed landscape" and "historic sites" typologies. TCLF highlights the importance of cultural landscapes as a legacy and identity marker for a particular society, including scenic, economic, ecological, social, recreational, and educational resources, making them an invaluable asset worth preserving.

Although LOC is less recognized as a type of resource, according to Foard & Partida (2005), in archaeology and history, LOC is vital in at least three different areas: research, interpretation, and commemoration. For example, archaeological research at a conflict landscape may help us understand warfare's nature in earlier periods and provides deeper insights into the deadly event. Piekarz (2007) added that landscapes of conflict serve several functions besides being the resource for recreational and tourism, i.e., land-based functions and cultural functions. In the context of a land-based function, preserving a LOC can simultaneously provide a green space for the local community, such as the Malawati Hill Fort at Kuala Selangor, Malaysia. LOC can also be regarded as cultural assets; for example, the site of the Battle of Little Bighorn memorializes the efforts of the native tribe to protect their sacred land and way of life from the US Army invasion. In the study of thanatourism (dark tourism), Winter (2009) argued that only by providing a context of time and space will create social memory, thus putting LOC at center stage.

Consider that historical landscapes of conflict fall into the study of conflict archaeology; simultaneously, it is part of archaeological heritage. Stine (1997) argues that, in archaeology, landscape studies, in general, have become a vital genre in order to understand historical material, culture, and social relations. The European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage (also known as Valletta Treaty) in the treaty series 143, 1992, defines archaeological heritage as “*all remains and objects and any other traces of mankind from past epochs.*” These shall include “*structures, constructions, groups of buildings, developed sites, moveable objects, monuments of other kinds as well as their context, whether situated on land or underwater.*” From the viewpoint of many archaeologists, any given landscapes are finite and non-renewable because, as discussed above, the landscape is a by-product of human interaction with nature. Over time, the change of way of life shapes the different types of landscapes, making a particular landscape of the past “extinct.” Once any given landscape is gone, it will be forever gone (Gilsen, 2014). Hence, like any other non-renewable resources, landscapes of conflict should be protected, preserved, and maintained unless proven to be worthless by professional evaluation (Gilsen, 2014). Moreover, preserving landscapes of conflict will provide a unique opportunity to study the material by-products of human conflict (Dyer, 2005).

There is an increasing demand from tourists to visit the sites and locations that involves horrific tragedy, including battle sites (Gough, 2007) who suffered an extremely high percentage of casualties during the first day of the Battle of the Somme in July 1916. Beaumont Hamel Memorial is a complex landscape

of commemoration where Newfoundland, Canadian, Scottish and British imperial associations compete for prominence. A previous paper argued that those who chose the site of the Park, and subsequently reordered its topography, helped to contrive a particular historical narrative that prioritized certain memories over others (Gough, 2004). Various researchers on visitation to historical landscapes of conflict have stated that tourists are becoming more interested in “dark tourism.” Bakar (2013), for instance, stated that American Civil War battlefields are one of the significant historical attraction types among the National Park Service heritage units. The landscapes of American Civil War battlefields serve as the “ceremonial center” for various veneration forms (Linenthal, 1993). The NPS is currently responsible for managing twenty-five battlefields<sup>2</sup> and received a combined total of 8.7 million visitors in 2011 (National Park Service, 2019).

Besides, as Istvan (2003) reported, the two main tourist attractions in Cambodia are Angkor Wat and The Killing Fields. He further added that 30% of tourists, who came to visit Cambodia, went to visit The Killing Fields. Likewise, Logan's (2006) studies on the *Dien Bien Phu* battle site in Vietnam found that the site attracted 100,000 visitors annually. He added that due to overwhelming numbers of visitations, the site is considered a valuable national resource, prompted the government to improve the transport network and public facilities of the town and its surrounding area. This interest in visiting historical landscapes of conflict is not only limited to local tourists. For example, a national public television network in Australia, SBS (2013), reported that every year 8,000 Australians are visiting Gallipoli to attend the dawn service in commemorating those who fought in World War I (WWI). In this instance, one might argue that those visiting were either involved or related to those involved in the conflict. However, Gatewood & Cameron (2004) indicated that many tourists who visited Gettysburg had no family involvement and had initially been motivated by historical interest. Thus, adopting sustainable strategies, public awareness, and establishing an appropriate guideline to encourage the preservation of this type of landscape is crucial.

Unfortunately, many of these LOCs have been lost to or continuously being threatened by rapid urban development in Malaysia. Besides the lack of proper legislation, poor understanding among decision-makers regarding public perception towards historical LOC may also contribute to futile efforts to protect this type of landscape. Therefore, this preliminary study attempted to identify public preferences and their awareness towards LOC, hopefully providing a significant understanding of future LOC preservation efforts.

## 2. METHODS

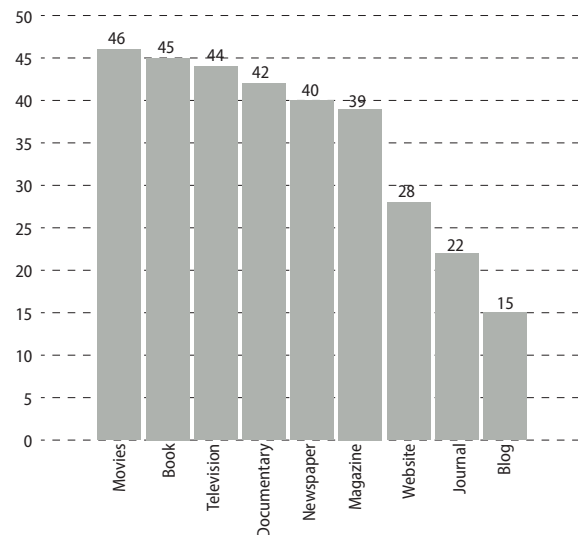
For this study, the preferences survey-questionnaire was used to identify and investigate the patterns of people's perception of battlefield preservation in Malaysia. The survey questionnaire was divided into three main sections: public awareness, preference towards preservation criteria, and respondents demographic. The majority of the questions are closed-ended, and there are only two open-ended questions in nature. The survey was conducted at Muzium Tentera Darat, Port Dickson at Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, due to its popularity and significant relationship with Malaysia's military history. The participants were randomly approached and selected based on their availability and willingness to participate. Before answering the questionnaire, the researcher explained the purpose of this study and convinced the participants that the questionnaire was for research purposes, and their personal information will be kept confidential. There was no time limit in answering the questionnaires. The researcher only helped in explaining and defining the questions to the participants when they needed help. Besides, to increase the study's reliability, the minimum age to participate in the preliminary study was limited to 17 years old, and the minimum sampling size should not be less than 60 based on the estimated number of weekend visitors (500 nos) with 90% confidence level. Finally, descriptive analysis was used to analyze the results obtained from the close-ended questionnaires.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In total, 60 respondents participated in the survey. The majority of the respondents are male, married, and consist of Malays ethnicity. The respondents are mostly local, with an age range between 17 to 60 years old and predominantly Muslim. In terms of their awareness of the battlefield landscape, only 38 respondents (63.3%) claimed that they have heard about the term. As anticipated, only a small number of respondents (25%) have experienced visiting Malaysia's battle site locations, while another 53% claimed that they have never made such a visit. The result also revealed a poor understanding of the battlefield landscape, in which 21.3% of the respondents had mistakenly identified or considered the museum as one of the local battle sites. Surprisingly, on the other hand, the majority of the respondents claimed that their pre-existing knowledge regarding military-related information was furnished by multiple sources (refer Figure 1). Based on the responses, the majority of the information was obtained from movies (76.6%), books (75%), television programs (73.3%), documentary (70%), newspapers (66.6%), and magazines (65%). An only a small percentage of the information came from the website (46.6%), journal (36.6%), and blog (25%).

The next finding shows that the respondents value the battlefield landscape's importance as vital historical resources and a place for remembrance (Table 1). The battlefield is recognized as a place that held historical significance for the nation ( $m=4.13$ ) and memorialized the fallen soldiers' self-sacrifice ( $m=4.05$ ). These two statements somehow reflect the respondents' values towards national patriotism by commemorating the battlefield landscape. These findings are consistent with Linenthal (1993), who suggested that the battlefield can be a place for people to seek patriotic inspiration through preserved, restored, and purified environments. Meanwhile, lower mean values for the battlefield's functions (e.g., as a cemetery), probably due to lack of lineage connections between the public and the soldier who fought in the battle. This finding corroborates with Gatewood and Cameron (2004), Seaton (1996), and Winter's (2011) study, which has suggested that visitors who have close connections with the war casualties strongly recognized the importance of war memorials and cemeteries located on the battlefield. The respondents somehow agreed that the battlefield landscape could be any place with deadly engagement ( $m=3.57$ ) and "place for campsite" ( $m=3.37$ ). Contrarily, they somehow disagreed that the battlefield landscape should be a "burial place" for those fallen in a battle ( $m=2.93$ ). This is interesting because it genuinely reflects the nature of military conflicts involving the locals (not as invading forces), allowing the fallen soldiers to be quickly buried in their hometown.

Figure 1: Sources of military-related information.



**Table 1:** Statements that best describe public understanding regarding the battlefield landscape.

Rank	List of basic battlefield landscape understanding	Mean	Missing Value
1	Battlefield landscape is a place that held profound historical significance for the nation as a whole	4.13	0
2	Battlefield landscape is a place to memorialize the bravery and self-sacrifice of the men fallen in battle	4.05	0
3	Battlefield landscape can be any place where the deadly engagement happened	3.57	0
4	Battlefield landscape is a place of war campsite	3.37	0
5	Battlefield landscape is a place of burial/ cemetery of the men fallen in battle (1 missing value)	2.93	1

The next section of the survey attempted to understand public preferences towards common physical elements or characteristics essential for historic battlefield preservation. Table 2 shows that the respondents agreed that man-made features such as campsites, tunnels, or trenches are the critical elements that should be preserved (m=4.05). The respondents also highlighted the importance of maintaining the sanctity or purity of the battlefield landscape. This is reflected in the second highest mean value (m=3.93), in which the respondents perceived that they must be able to see the appearance of the battlefield at the time of the conflict. It is also surprising that the respondents valued preserving natural features within the battlefield's boundary (m=3.83) and those adjacent to the boundary lines (m=3.86).

On the other hand, the respondents are also willing to accept that the future of battlefield preservation may only include the site's current conditions due to continuous landscape changes (m=3.70). Besides, interestingly, the public somehow agrees that historical battle sites must be preserved regardless of the level of historical impacts that the sites have (m=3.56). These findings agree with Bakar's (2013) findings, which showed that public preference towards military encampment and soldiers' defensive positions is considered a significant element for battlefield interpretation. Besides, restoring the actual battlefields to reflect what the soldiers saw during the war, such as reforestation of original forests, orchards, and man-made structures such as fence lines or farm lanes, reflects public concerns regarding the improvement of the historical integrity of the battlefields.

**Table 2:** Preservation criteria for battlefield landscape.

Rank	The physical characteristic of battlefield preservation (n=60)	Mean	Missing Value
1	Any man-made features associated with the battle, for example, campsites, tunnels, or trenches	4.05	0
2	The appearance of the battlefield at the time of the conflict	3.93	0
3	The natural features that contribute to selecting the site as a battle place (such as a series of hills)	3.86	0
4	The present condition of the site and its environment	3.70	0
5	Only significant battlefields that have impacts on history should be preserved	3.56	0

The second topic includes public preferences on interpretation elements that should be focused on the battlefield to enhance their understanding of historical events. As shown in table 3, surprisingly, the public feels that military vehicles used in the battle are the most vital element to be presented (m=4.15). However, this finding suggested that misconception towards the military museum's existence probably deceives the respondents' preference. On the other hand, these results also match those observed in an earlier study by Bakar (2013) that found male participants have significantly higher preferences than the female participants for images that show military equipment in battle positions. It also shows that an abundance of military equipment such as battle tanks and other weapons available at the surveyed location may influence their preference level (m=4.13) due to the symbol of masculinity (Melzer, 2012).

Besides, memorials, battlefield markers (for point of interest), and the battlefield's original views are considered very important by the respondents for battlefield interpretation (m=4.03, 4.03, 4.00). Interestingly, the respondents do not consider rebuilding structures relevant to the battle (military or non-military) as necessary compared to what was commonly practiced in American Civil War battle sites. The same results are reflected in the last two items (vegetation and statue), probably due to lack of understanding and religious consideration. Both elements received the lowest mean scores, m=3.74, and m=3.59.

**Table 3:** Element to be included in battlefield landscape preservation for battlefield interpretation.

Rank	Important elements for battlefield preservation (n=60)	Mean	Missing Value
1	Type of vehicles used in the battle	4.15	0
2	The weapon used in the battle	4.13	2
3	Memorials with text descriptions	4.03	0
4	Battlefield markers (to identify the point of interest in the battle)	4.03	2
5	Original viewshed of the battle	4.00	1
6	Information Panelling	3.95	2
7	Rebuilding structures that are relevant to the battle	3.95	0
8	Abstract sculpture with the battlefield theme	3.85	1
9	Vegetation exists during the battle	3.74	2
10	Statue of people	3.59	0

The benefits of preserving historical battlefield landscape were also investigated in the preferences survey. As mentioned in the study introduction, the battlefield landscape may increase the local economy, mainly through tourism. Nevertheless, the results show that the benefits of preserving historic battlefields are beyond monetary values. The respondents highly agreed that the battlefield landscape is vital in educating the younger generation about the dark history (m=4.18), a place to be remembered by all generations (m 4.18), and could also enhance a sense of patriotism among the people (m=4.10). It is exciting to note that potential economic values that could be benefited from the tourism industry are perceived as less critical in this context, although the mean scores are considered high (m=4.02, m=3.85). Besides, the respondents have a slight agreement of the battlefield landscape as a healing space for those emotionally and physically affected by the horrific event (m=3.63). The overall scores for this topic are presented in table 4.

**Table 4:** Benefits of Malaysia's historic battlefield landscape preservation.

Rank	Benefits of battlefield preservation (n=60)	Mean	Missing Value
1	The battlefield landscape is an important place to be remembered by all generations.	4.18	0
2	Battlefield landscape could help in educating the younger generation in understanding their history	4.18	0
3	Battlefield landscape could increase the sense and value of patriotism of the people	4.10	0
4	Battlefield landscape has high potential to be a tourism attraction	4.02	0
5	Battlefield landscape should be preserved because it could bring positive economic values	3.85	0
6	Battlefield landscape could be a healing space for those emotionally and physically affected	3.63	0

Lastly, the fourth topic identified some of the factors that hindered the battlefield landscape from being promoted as potential tourism attractions. The findings suggested that currently, there is a lack of supporting industries (m=3.38) that specializes in “dark” tourism packages and promotions from government agencies (m=3.29). This is not surprising since most of our local attractions are mainly associated and promoted as cultural or eco-based tourism. The lack of military history education (m=3.18) and inadequate supporting facilities (m=3.17) have also limited the battlefield potential as tourism attractions. Nevertheless, the results also shed some of the perceived taboo regarding spaces that involved deadly conflicts. The results (Table 6) suggested that the respondents disagree with the statement that visiting this type of landscape may contradict one’s religious belief; battlefields are considered haunted spaces and improper to visit places with many fatal military casualties. Interestingly, these further support some of the secular ideas that battlefields are considered sacred, and visitors often considered themselves similar to pilgrims visiting holy places (Bakar, 2013).

**Table 5:** Issue associated with battlefield landscape as tourism attractions.

Rank	List of common issues (n=60)	Mean	Missing Value
1	Lack of supporting industries	3.38	0
2	Lack of promotion from the government agencies	3.29	1
3	Lack of exposure to education	3.18	0
4	Lack of supporting infrastructure and facilities	3.17	1

**Table 6:** Perceived taboo related to battlefield landscape as a place of attraction.

Rank	Perceived taboo (n=60)	Mean	Missing Value
1	Battlefield landscape is not important to help to visualize and understand history.	1.98	1
2	It could contradict an individual's religious believes	2.05	0
3	Battlefield landscape is a haunted place	2.13	0
4	It is not proper to visit a place where many people died in the war	2.35	0

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Malaysian landscapes are long associated with military conflicts. For more than 500 years, wars have dominated a large part of Malaysian history. Armed resistance towards the invasion of Portuguese in 1511, the Dutch-Johore campaign 1606-1641, British colonization of Malay States 1791-1957, The Second World War Malayan Campaign 1941-1945, Communist Insurgency 1968-1989, Malaysia-Indonesia Confrontation 1963-1966, and the recent Lahad Datu standoff in 2013 are notable examples why battlefield landscapes should be considered a significant cultural resources in Malaysia.

In general, people have a positive perception of the battlefield landscape and its preservation towards nation-building. The public perceives and recognizes the importance of man-made features directly associated with the battle compared to events or human casualties that formulate the battle's results. The study also revealed that religious and mystical phenomena typically associated with deadly spaces are not public issues. This study has provided a promising foundation for future research in protecting Malaysia's battlefield landscape's historical values. Consequently, this also will provide an alternative cultural experience that can benefit the local tourism industry.

Nevertheless, although recent years have seen a worldwide upsurge in demand for dark tourism, which may lead to battlefield preservation, Malaysia and various other Southeast Asian countries are still very cautious about promoting this potential due to cultural sensitivity. A study was done by Masanti (2016) on the development of dark tourism in Sabah, Malaysia, found that the idea was less acceptable amongst local communities due to concerns it would be unethical to exploit a dark tragedy from the past. This study concluded that, although it is possible to promote dark tourism in Southeast Asia, it should be branded and marketed appropriately, without crossing any culturally sensitive lines.

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