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"Harmony in Spaces : Blending Heritage, Nature and Design"

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Sustainable Management of Public Open Spaces: A Case Study of Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz (Padang Polo), Ipoh

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Abstract

This research examines the sustainable management of Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz (Padang Polo) in Ipoh, Perak, a major urban public open space in Ipoh, Perak, which faces challenges related to environmental sustainability, maintenance constraints, and limited community engagement. The study aims to assess existing management practices, identify key challenges, and propose context-specific strategies to enhance the ecological, social, and economic performance of the park. A qualitative research approach was adopted, involving semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and systematic field observations. The findings indicate that Padang Polo plays a significant role as a recreational and well-being space due to its central location and mature tree coverage. However, several issues were identified, including inadequate maintenance capacity, vandalism, limited use of indigenous plant species, and irregular community participation. Although certain sustainable practices are present, such as tree retention and irrigation systems, ecological sustainability and community stewardship remain at a moderate level. The study concludes that stronger integrated management, enhanced ecological planning, and continuous community involvement are essential for positioning Padang Polo as a model for sustainable urban park management in Malaysia.

Keyword: Sustainable Park Management, Public Open Space (POS), Urban Park, Community Participation, Environmental Sustainability, Urban Green Space

INTRODUCTION

In modern urban planning, sustainable development has emerged as an exemplary paradigm that harmoniously addresses environmental protection and social and economic sustainability. Public open spaces, like parks and green spaces, play a very important role in improving ecological conditions, promoting social interaction, and creating economic benefits in improving ecological conditions and generating economic benefits in an urban setup. In Malaysia, rapid urbanization has led to an increase in the use of well-managed and well-designed public spaces that lead to physical and biological health and improved community welfare.

Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz known colloquially as the Padang Polo Site, is one of the key recreational grounds in the region of Ipoh in the Malaysian state of Perak that provides the community with the necessary infrastructure for recreational and fitness activities. Despite the key role that the site plays within the community and the numerous benefits that the inhabitants derive from its services and utilities free of charge, the site is currently facing various sustainability and community engagement challenges that are similarly rife in Malaysia.

Although the benefits derived from parks in terms of their socio-environmental impacts are now well accepted, previous studies on sustainable park management in Malaysia have been limited to larger city parks in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. To fulfill this research gap, this study proposes investigating sustainable management options for Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz, with emphasis on improving its eco, social, as well as economic integrity.

This research aims to assess the current management system and sustainability condition of Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz by examining existing management practices, maintenance approaches, and overall park performance. In addition, the research seeks to identify the principal challenges and limitations encountered in ensuring effective park management, including environmental, infrastructural, and organisational issues. Based on these findings, the study further aims to propose viable and context-specific measures that can enhance the sustainable management of Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz, with emphasis on improving ecological sustainability, management efficiency and community engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable Management

The role of sustainable management is indispensable to ensure that urban development proceeds with no compromise on environmental integrity, social inclusivity, and economic stability. In an urban context, public open spaces are a fundamental asset in supporting ecological balance and community interaction for the overall well-being of residents. Sustainable urban development integrates environmental stewardship, social equity, and economic viability as guiding frameworks for maintaining resilient and livable cities. Sustainable management of these spaces ensures not only the functionality of the resource but its contribution toward public health, biodiversity, and social cohesion. In Malaysia, sustainable management practices in public parks and recreational areas are increasingly under scrutiny as rapid urbanization translates into issues on maintenance, accessibility, and environmental degradation.

Past research emphasizes crucial facets of sustainable management of parks. For example, Au-Yong et al., (2023) indicates notable gaps between the expectations of visitors regarding park facilities versus reality, hence pointing to weaknesses in maintenance systems. In the same way Ahmad and Matori (2017) points out specific challenges in its management and upkeep within Padang Polo itself. Collectively, these studies stress a context-sensitive and participatory approach toward management to ensure that public open spaces are managed in a manner that caters effectively to environmental and societal needs alike.

Urban Public Open Space and Parks

Public open spaces and parks in urban areas are an important part of sustainable city planning for the environmental, social, and health benefits accruing to citizens living in cities. Public open spaces, parks, playgrounds, gardens, and recreational areas contribute to "green lungs" for the city by alleviating pollution, maintaining temperature balance, and increasing biodiversity. Urban parks were seen by Chiesura (2004) as contributing significantly to an improvement in the quality of life for residents by providing psychological relaxation, opportunities for physical activity, and space for social interaction. On their part, Jim and Chen (2006) noted that appropriately managed urban green space contributes to ecological stability and environmental resilience through their substantial support for plant growth, runoff reduction, and air quality improvements. Thus, the availability and proper management of urban public

open spaces feature as important factors to achieve sustainability through balanced natural and built-up systems.

Examples of such urban parks that fit into the multifunctional role of public open spaces in the Malaysian context include Taman Tasik Perdana in Kuala Lumpur and Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz (Padang Polo) in Ipoh. These provide places for recreation, cultural activities, and strengthening community bonds while still supporting biodiversity in the urban environment. Nevertheless, various studies, including Abdul Aziz (2012), have stated that most urban parks in Malaysia face issues such as inadequate maintenance, poor design integration, and insufficient stakeholder involvement within the management. Indeed, addressing these challenges with sustainable management approaches emphasizing ecological conservation, stakeholder cooperation, and community participation can improve the long-term functionality and value of urban parks as an inclusive and resilient public asset.

Community Participation

Community participation is a vital ingredient in bringing about sustainable management of urban public open space and parks. Active community participation can ensure that plans, designs, and maintenance reflect local needs, values, and priorities. Following Arnstein's (1969), participation is considered real where the community is empowered to affect decisions rather than merely be recipients of decisions from above. In this regard, participation in park management could be in the form of public consultations, volunteer programs, or even community-based monitoring. As Sanoff (2000) noted, this nurtures a sense of ownership and leads to better care and more responsible use of urban green spaces. Hence, community participation not only enhances social cohesion but also ensures the sustainability of such open spaces over the long term.

In Malaysia, community participation in managing parks is increasingly recognized as an indispensable strategy for enhancing sustainability and inclusiveness. Various studies have demonstrated that including local communities in the planning and maintenance of parks bridges the gap between public authorities and users, making management more responsive and efficient. Examples of community-led initiatives for urban parks include clean-ups, urban gardening, and recreational programs, which have engendered positive impacts on park stewardship and environmental awareness among residents. Nevertheless, full participatory management remains constrained due to several inhibiting factors, such as limited funding, lack of awareness, and inadequate institutional support. Therefore, it is important to strengthen partnerships among local authorities, stakeholders, and residents to make community involvement a continuous, ongoing process in sustainable urban park management.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research design is adopted for this study to explore the sustainable management of Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz, commonly known as Padang Polo, in Ipoh, Perak. This qualitative approach was appropriate for the research at hand, as it can give an in-depth, thorough understanding of management practices, stakeholder perceptions, and on-site conditions that influence the park's sustainability. This study, therefore, seeks to find out patterns, meanings, and insights relating to ecological, social, and economic aspects of park management not easily captured in quantitative methods.

Study Area

Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz (Padang Polo) in Ipoh, Perak is identified to be one of the most

important urban public open spaces that provide benefits to the surrounding communities. The public space is centrally located and faces challenges with sustainability and community engagement, making it appropriate to be chosen for this research on sustainable public open space management in Malaysia.



Figure 1: Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz (Authors, 2025)

Data Collection Methods

There are two main data collection methods to be utilized in the research: semi-structured interviews and field observations. Semi-structured interviews will involve key stakeholders: representatives from Majlis Bandaraya Ipoh (MBI), park maintenance staff, and regular park users. It ensures that flexibility in questioning is adopted while necessary sustainable management topics are covered. Observations in the park were conducted to study the physical condition of the park, its maintenance practices, and patterns of public use. Specific details on facility conditions, cleanliness, vegetation management, and user activities were recorded using an observation checklist.

Sampling Method

A purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting participants who have direct experience or involvement either in managing the park or using it. The sample size consisted approximately seven participants, distributed as follows: participants, distributed as follows: two (2) officers from MBI, two (2) maintenance staff in the park, and three (3) users. The sample size is determined by the principle of data saturation, whereby data is collected up to a point where no new themes emerge. This agrees with recommendations by Guest et al., (2006) and Saunders et al. (2017), who indicate that data saturation ensures richness and credibility in qualitative studies.

Data Analysis

The data collected is largely qualitative in nature which is analysed through thematic analysis, a process whereby themes, patterns, and meanings identified in the qualitative data are given identification and organisation. The transcribed interviews are systemically encoded, while the field observation is also analysed to validate the findings of the interviews using visuals in the field setting. The ATLAS.ti software is utilised in the encoding process, which facilitates the organisation of identified patterns and themes in the data collected. The results of the analysis are presented in themes formed from thematic analyses of the interview transcriptions as well as the field observation. The themes formed encompass environmental/ecological sustainability, park management/infrastructure, user participation, as well as comfort/safety.

Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in full compliance with ethics. Every participant in this study was informed of

the purpose and the procedure of the study and will provide informed consent before participating. The identity of the participants was kept confidential, as will the data gathered in the process, for research purposes only. The study presents minimal risk and does not involve invasive or sensitive procedures. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant UiTM Research Ethics Committee before data collection commences.

Research Duration and Location

The study was conducted from 7 October 2025 to 23 January 2026. Data collection took place at Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz (Padang Polo). For supplementary interviews, the study area was extended to Majlis Bandaraya Ipoh and analysis was conducted at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Seri Iskandar Campus, Perak.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

A systematic analysis of the interviews has been conducted with the aid of observations that support the analysis of the interviews. The analysis of the interviews has been performed with the aid of the software ATLAS.ti. Several similarities and patterns that relate to the management and utilisation of the Tanan Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz (Padang Polo) have been identified to address the research issues of landscape planning and management and the impact of the utilisation of the landscape on the environment.

Environmental Conditions & Ecological Sustainability

In respect to environmental factors, the results show that Padang Polo has a medium ecological sustainability, though there are potential future risks as the area is increasing in its urban developments. The management staff, as well as the representatives of the authorities, admitted that the availability of mature trees, large green area, as well as the existing irrigation system, is a factor contributing to the cooling effect in the microclimate, which is a positive factor in improving the ecological condition in the park. At the same time, the irrigation system is also contributing to water conservation, which is a positive factor in the sustainability process in the management of the urban park.

However, both interviews and field observations revealed several environmental limitations that constrain overall ecological performance. Issues such as improper waste disposal, limited use of indigenous plant species, and an overreliance on shade-providing trees were frequently highlighted. The absence of recycling facilities and environmental awareness signage further indicates weak environmental resource management and limited efforts to promote sustainability among park users. Although vegetation within the park is generally maintained in satisfactory condition, biodiversity levels remain low, as reflected by the minimal presence of native plant species and wildlife. These findings suggest that while Padang Polo supports certain natural processes, its current landscape configuration does not fully enhance ecological resilience. Overall, the ecological sustainability of Padang Polo can be considered moderate, indicating the need for targeted improvements to strengthen biodiversity conservation and long-term environmental sustainability.

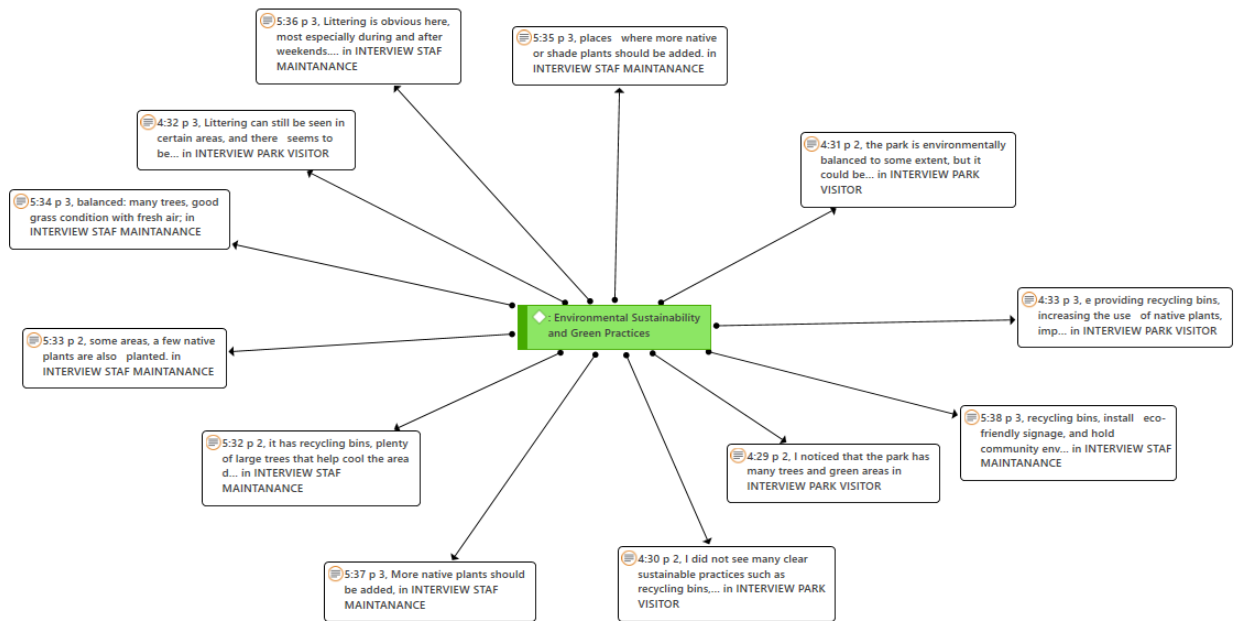


Figure 2: Network Findings Interview from ATLAS ti



Figure 3: Observation at Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz (Authors, 2025)

Park Management, Maintenance, and Infrastructure

In relation to the management, maintenance, and infrastructure, it was found that there are daily and weekly activities involving maintenance carried out at Padang Polo, such as cutting the grass and inspections. Nevertheless, despite such continued efforts, it was found that the management of this park faces many challenges due to low visit capacity, low staff, and a lack of funding. It was agreed that this impairs the effectiveness of such maintenance programs carried out.

Further information gathered from the users of the parks has also indicated worries regarding vandalism, waste management, and the degradation of the physical infrastructure of the parks, especially on Saturday and during massive public gatherings. Users of the parks indicated that there are a number of infrastructural services that are regularly vandalized or in a bad state of repair, including benches, exercise equipment, toilets, and lighting. These observations have been upheld, particularly the lack of even walkways in the

parks, inadequate lighting in some places, and old infrastructure that may pose potential dangers to users. Though the recreation facilities at Padang Polo are adequate, the level of maintenance has not coped well with the level of usage.

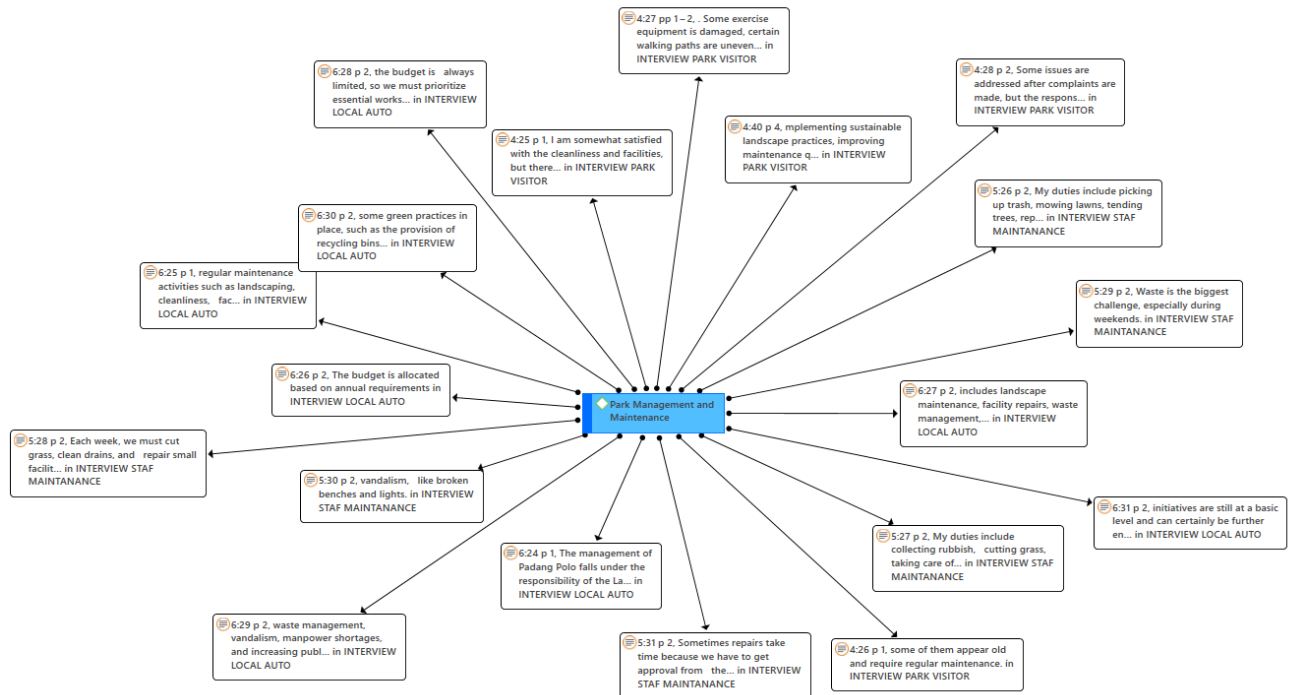


Figure 4: Network Findings Interview from ATLAS ti



Figure 5: Observation at Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz (Authors, 2025)

Community Use, Engagement, and Social Sustainability

The evidence suggests that Padang Polo serves as a very dynamic and actively used public space in the city, where people are making constant use of the park from dawn till dusk for recreational and health purposes. The park serves various types of people, both alone and in groups, especially in the early morning and evening hours. The park serves these people in a way that highlights its significance in promoting health and a healthy lifestyle within the city.

Nonetheless, given the significant level of utilisation, the level of engagement with the management and upkeep of the park remains low. Interviews conducted showed that the upkeep of the park is considered the sole duty of the concerned authority, thus the level of shared engagement remains low. Also, engagement

of the residents was observed to be linked to specific events, which occur during organized events rather than ongoing engagement. Other factors such as low awareness, the issue of time, and the absence of systematic engagement opportunities further impinge on the level of engagement of the residents. These findings suggest that while Padang Polo successfully supports social interaction and recreational use, greater emphasis on community participation is required to strengthen social sustainability and foster a stronger sense of collective ownership over the park.

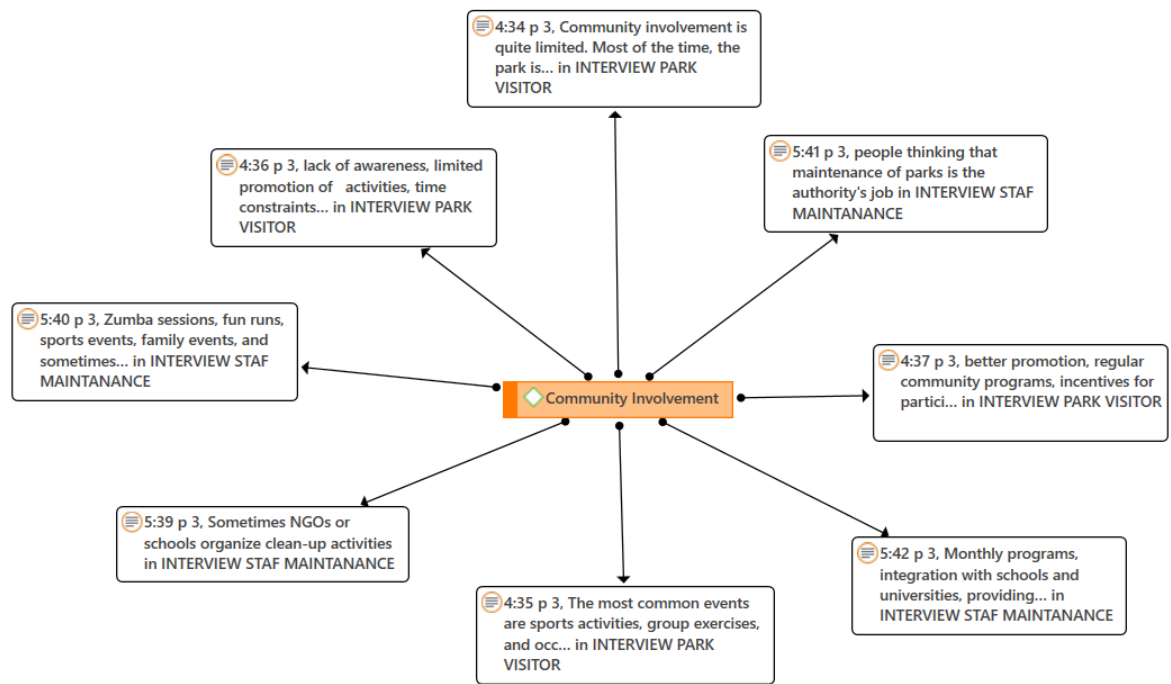


Figure 6: Network Findings Interview from ATLAS ti



Figure 7: Observation at Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz (Authors, 2025)

User Comfort, Safety, and Overall Park Experience

The comfort and safety of park users play a crucial role in promoting a positive experience of the overall park environment and the long-term sustainability of urban public open spaces. Findings of the in-depth interviews and field observations show that park users view Padang Polo as a comfortable recreational space, especially due to its openness, visibility in the park, and the jogging/walking paths provided in the park.

However, a few points related to the aspects of safety and comfort emerged that influence the overall user experience. Poor illumination in certain spots, especially in the evening, emerged considerably as a point that precipitates a lack of security. Moreover, irregular pathway layouts, old infrastructural services, and the improper upkeep of certain infrastructural services, like toilets and resting spots, have been noticed to negatively influence the level of comfort and accessibility, especially for older people and those accompanied by children. Field observation also reveals that even though there exist sufficient spots for different activities in the park, there are certain areas that require urgent development for the level of security and customer satisfaction relating to security services in the park to improve.

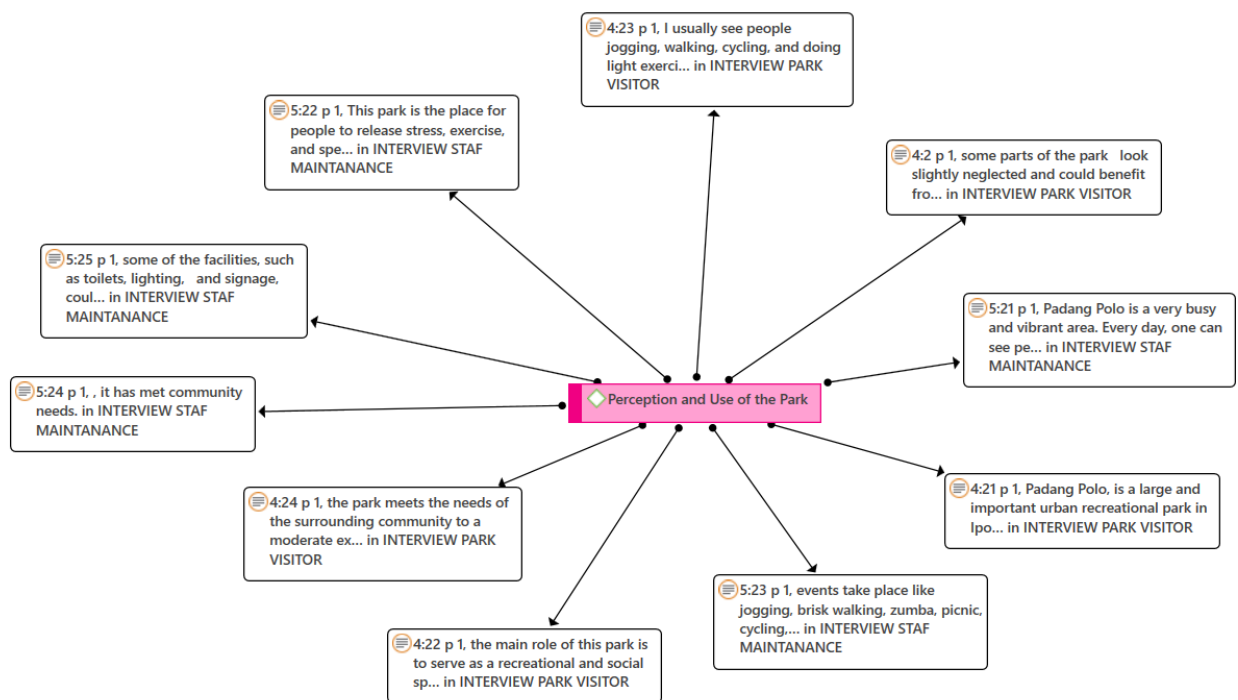


Figure 8: Network Findings Interview from ATLAS ti



Figure 9: Observation at Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz (Authors, 2025)

Implications, for Sustainable Park Planning

More importantly, taken together, these findings suggest that Padang Polo is of great social value to its

community but is struggling with challenges of sustainability, infrastructure, and community participation. In agreement with previous literature, a lack of community participation was found to be one of the factors contributing to park sustainability. Based on this analysis, it is recommended that when park landscapes of Padang Polo are considered, they should take a more holistic approach towards developing sustainability within park landscapes

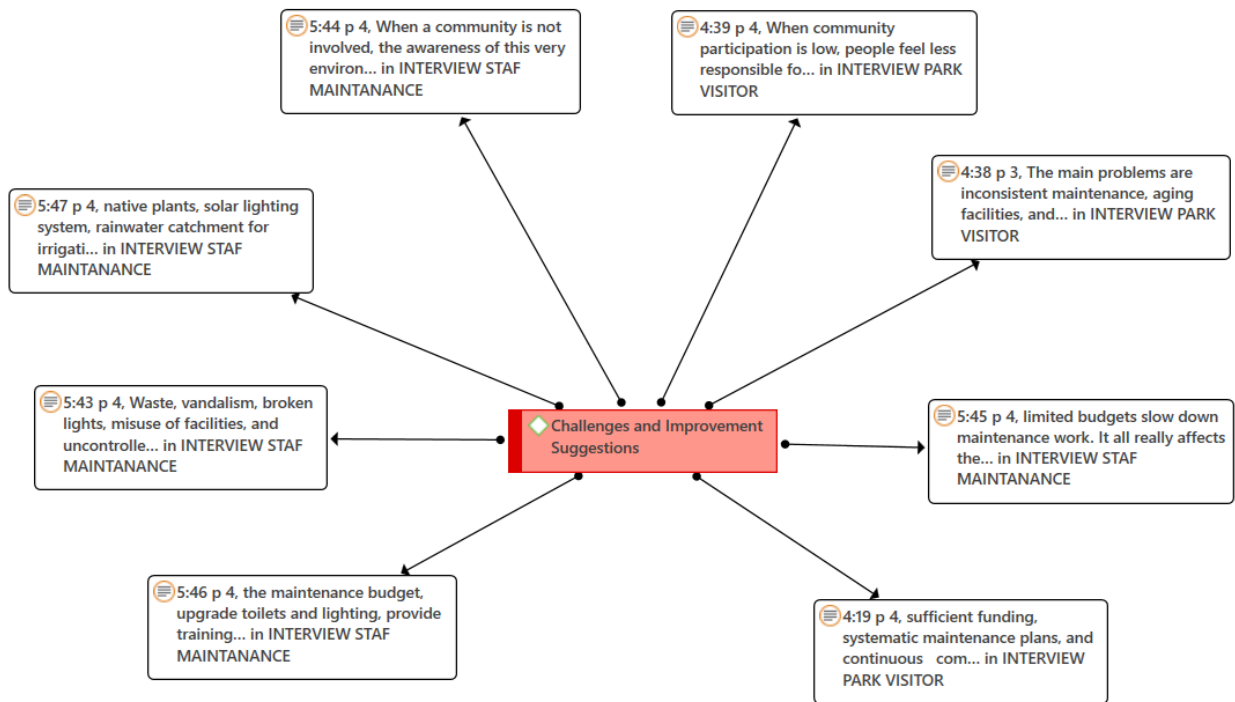


Figure 10: Network Findings Interview from ATLAS ti



Figure 11: Observation at Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz (Authors, 2025)

The ATLAS.ti interview network for Figure 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10 is presented below. The results of the findings are presented in the context of park management, which is intertwined with the perception of the community, environmental practices, community participation, challenges, as well as the proposed improvements. The results clearly show the connection among the practices of the management, the environmental practices, as well as the participation of the community, while the challenges mentioned in the results relate to the lack of equipment in the park for improving the quality of the entire place.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this study, some recommendations are proposed to enhance the management of Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz for sustainability. In the context of managing and maintaining the parks, it is suggested that local authorities enhance maintenance planning by efficiently allocating resources, conducting audits of park facilities on a regular basis, and scheduling repairs in due time. Increasing manpower support, along with adopting a preventive maintenance approach, might help reduce infrastructure deterioration and improve overall park quality, safety, and user satisfaction.

Ecologically, more value should be placed on enhancement using indigenous plant species and landscape diversity. Situated around the park, recycling stations, environmental signage, and educational programs can be constructed that encourage responsible behavior among users and make them more aware of environmental sustainability. Enhancing biodiversity through habitat-friendly planting and ecological zoning can further improve the park's resilience and performance in an environmental perspective for the long term.

About community participation, it is recommended that structured and continuous engagement programmes be introduced to foster a sense of shared responsibility among park users. Initiatives such as community-led clean-up activities, volunteer maintenance programmes, and collaborative events involving residents and stakeholders could strengthen social cohesion and encourage collective stewardship. Strengthening partnerships between local authorities, community groups, and non-governmental organisations would further support inclusive and sustainable park management.

Overall, the implementation of these recommendations requires an integrated approach that balances effective management practices, environmental conservation, and active community involvement. Through coordinated efforts and sustained institutional support, Padang Polo has the potential to evolve into a model of sustainable urban park management that enhances environmental quality, social well-being, and urban liveability.

LIMITATION

Despite the significance of the findings of this research regarding the sustainable management of Taman Rekreasi Sultan Abdul Aziz (Padang Polo), there are also some limitations of the research which ought to be recognized. Firstly, the focus of the research will merely be on one urban public open space in Ipoh, the state of Perak.

Secondly, this study is qualitative, with findings collected from a combination of semi-structured interviews and field observation. While this is effective for yielding a rich insight into management and user perspectives, it is also a rather limited method since it is not possible to statistically quantify sustainability performance. Finally, for a relatively small group of participants chosen using a method of purposive sampling, it is possible that a more representative insight is not gained.

Finally, limitations of a certain period and resources may have contributed to how much data is being collected and analyzed. Observation of data collection had a finite period that may not justify data

regarding the level of park use and maintenance during a specific season. Nonetheless, results are relevant in that they offer insights into specific issues contained in this study.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion drawn from this study is that Padang Polo is a very important urban space where recreational activities and well-being within the community can be supported. The presence of this space has made it accessible to a wide range of ages within the society and has been considered a very active and relaxing place within the urban environment. Its strategic position and the presence of mature trees have made it very valuable.

The results reveal that, even though Padang Polo satisfies the community needs, several issues exist in the potential offered by the facility in its ability to act fully as a sustainable recreation park. These major factors include littering, vandalism, manpower, and funds, which interact and impact maintenance and quality of such a facility. Moreover, given the current adoption of eco-friendly practices, the underuse of natural species and technology calls for greater improvement in ecological enhancements.

Community involvement was identified as being both evident but irregular, with a reliance on organized events to ensure participation. It is a clear indicator that there should be heightened community awareness, promotion, and collective programs to foster a sense of joint responsibility between community and park users. Community involvement is vital in ensuring park sustainability.

In final analysis, there is great potential for the development of Padang Polo as a model sustainable urban park. The fulfilment of this vision shall call for a combination of efforts in the maintenance management, initiatives in the pursuit of environmental sustainability, civic participation, and continued support from the local authority. Through this, it is possible for Padang Polo to remain an exemplar of improved liveability in the city and a model sustainable open space in Malaysia.

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