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A demanding task: using economic techniques to assess animal priorities.
A reply to Mason et al.

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It is gratifying to see in a timely paper, that Mason et al. (1998) concur with many of the concerns we and other workers have raised regarding the methodology and interpretation of consumer demand studies. Their commentary is a useful synopsis of the multifarious problems of this area and includes practical suggestions for solutions which they regard as appropriate for overcoming these.

Some of the comments made by Mason et al. (1998) are perhaps possible only with the benefit of hindsight. When demand theory was first proposed as a method of measuring motivation, little thought was given to which aspect of behaviour should be considered as the most important. It was implicitly assumed that total duration of a behaviour, or time spent with a resource, would be the best measure. It is only after detailed studies were conducted over several 24-h periods (e.g. Sherwin & Nicol 1996) that it was determined other aspects of behaviour, for example, frequency or regularity, were also important and could be defended even at the expense of duration. Indeed, the rescheduling of behaviour is of considerable interest. Its occurrence is not necessarily a failing of the methodology, as implied by Mason et al. (1998) in their statement that rescheduling of feeding-bout length does not reflect the importance of feed. Rather, if an animal visits a resource half as frequently as before and makes each visit last twice as long, it is telling us something important. However, it is likely that breaking the contingency will lead to extinction of the response. This problem also relates to guideline 3 which suggests that the price paid and amount of resource used must co-vary. We do not believe it is always possible to set up a system that allows the amount consumed to co-vary in the way required to measure elasticity of demand as suggested by Mason et al. (1998). Consider a behaviour in which satiety is achieved only at the end of a single bout, and the animal will work repeatedly only when it can complete the bout to achieve satiety (possible examples include mating,