ANALYSIS

“I struggled with this money business”: respondents’ perspectives on contingent valuation

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Abstract

In the long-running debates about the validity and legitimacy of contingent valuation (CV), very little research has engaged directly with respondents during or after the survey to explore what individuals’ willingness to pay (WTP) figure meant. This paper presents the results of qualitative research with respondents to a CV survey carried out as part of the appraisal of a specific nature conservation policy in the UK. The results show that respondents’ questioned the validity of their WTP figures through discussion of the difficulties they experienced in framing a meaningful reply. Significant difficulties included problems in contextualising what the scheme was and how much it might be worth in both monetary and non-monetary terms; an inability to work out a value for one scheme in isolation from others in other parts of the UK; and feelings that values for nature were not commensurable with monetary valuation. Turning to the legitimacy of CV, participants in the research challenged claims that CV is a democratic process for ensuring that public values are incorporated in policy decisions. Recognizing that hard economic choices have to be made in order to achieve nature conservation goals, participants argued for a decision-making institution where local people could contribute to environmental policy decisions through dialogue with scientists and policy-makers. In the final part of the paper, this project is compared with three studies that have also used qualitative approaches with respondents during and/or after a CV survey. The paper concludes that more context-specific, qualitative research with respondents is needed to explore further the conclusion that CV may not be a good methodology for capturing complex, cultural values for nature and landscape. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Contingent valuation; Cultural values; Nature conservation policy; Qualitative research

1. Introduction

As a means of attaching monetary values to environmental ‘goods’ and ‘services’, contingent...
valuation (CV) has been subject to much criticism both within and without the discipline of economics. Discussion about the validity and legitimacy of CV encompasses issues such as how well willingness to pay (WTP) figures can be measured, what they measure, and the acceptability of WTP as a means of representing the values of members of the public in policy making. There is debate, for example, about the extent to which WTP figures are sensitive to task and context as represented in discussions about embedding, symbolic and ‘part-whole’ biases (Mitchell and Carson, 1989; Boyle et al., 1994); what non-compliance, refusals or protest bids might mean (Spash and Hanley, 1995); what differences between WTP and willingness-to-accept might signify (Hanemann, 1991; Bateman and Turner, 1993); whether people respond to CV surveys about non-traded environmental ‘goods’ as consumers or as citizens (Sagoff, 1988; Keats, 1994; Blamey and Quiggin, 1995); whether WTP measures economic value or something else such as buying moral satisfaction (Kahneman and Knetsch, 1992); whether WTP figures represent pre-existing well-formed preferences or are artifacts constructed in response to the elicitation question (Fischhoff, 1991; Gregory et al., 1993); and the role of benefit estimation in policy-making (Bromley, 1990; Jacobs, 1997; Pearce, 1998).

Such questions still seem far from being resolved. On the one hand, it is argued that dubious and anomalous results can be accounted for in terms of faulty survey or questionnaire design. Such problems can be corrected through good practice and further research to fine-tune the technique (Fischhoff and Furby, 1988; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 1993; Hutchinson et al., 1995). On the other hand, authors such as Sagoff (1994), Hanemann (1994), Keats (1997) highlight challenges to CV posed by results which they regard as inconsistent with neo-classical theory. In short, there remains a gap between those who, like Diamond and Hausman (1994), regard CV as ‘a deeply flawed methodology for measuring non-use value, one that does not estimate what its proponents claim to be estimating’ (p. 62), and those who agree with Pearce (1998): ‘[M]uch of the controversy is misplaced and reflects poor understanding of what monetization is about’ (p. 97).

The dearth of respondents’ voices in debates about CV is striking. Yet members of the public who have completed a CV questionnaire are the very people who, through their responses, hold the whole edifice together. Investigating CV from their perspectives would thus seem to have much to contribute both to understanding of the processes by which people produce their WTP figures, and to debates about validity and legitimacy. To the extent that CV surveys can have real consequences, the ways in which respondents arrive at their WTP figures, and their views of what the figures signify, surely matter. Predominant approaches to researching CV do not lend themselves to making known what respondents think and feel as they tackle WTP (see Vatn and Bromley, 1994; Clark, 1995; Nyborg, 1999). Much research is concerned with supporting the technique, enabling it to produce a better ‘product’, rather than with understanding the processes through which the ‘product’ is constructed or with exploring the validity of CV’s assumptions. However much the CV instrument is refined through such research, the basic proposition that individuals have (or can construct) market preferences for environmental ‘goods’ remains a given. This point is made strongly by Boyle et al., (1994). Despite extensive pre-testing of the Desvousges et al. (1993) central flyway CV questionnaire, estimated contingent values remained very similar regardless of the number of birds that would be ‘saved’ under the different scenarios. Boyle et al. (1994) concluded: ‘[I]dentifying the ultimate explanation of our results is not easy because our study, like most contingent-valuation studies, does not contain sufficient information to identify how respondents formulate their valuation responses. Unfortunately the economic construct provides hypotheses regarding the outcome of valuation experiments, but is fairly anemic in insights about the processes respondents employ when formulating valuation responses’ (p. 78–79).

In this paper we open the ‘black box’ that is CV, and particularly WTP, using a combination of qualitative methods in research conducted between 1993 and 1995 with respondents to a CV
survey carried out to estimate the benefits of a UK nature conservation policy. English Nature commissioned a CV survey to evaluate a Wildlife Enhancement Scheme (WES) on Pevensey Levels (Willis et al., 1995; Willis et al., 1996). The Levels, 4000 hectares of wet grazing marsh on the south coast of England, are of international importance for nature conservation. The WES entailed making payments of £72 per hectare per year to farmers on the Levels to ensure they continued to farm in ways that were suitable to maintain the conservation values of the site. We worked with small numbers of respondents after they had completed the CV survey to discuss the validity of their WTP figures and the legitimacy of using them to inform policy. In other words, did respondents feel that their WTP figures were a good way of representing their values for nature conservation to decision-makers? The paper first describes the methodology used in the research. This is followed by presentation of the main findings concerning the WTP figures and the legitimacy of using numbers derived from CV surveys to support policy decisions. Finally, we compare our findings with those of three other studies that have examined CV from the perspectives of the respondents.

2. Methodology

The research project entailed collaboration between ourselves, the staff at English Nature, and the environmental economists who conducted the CV survey of the WES. The CV questionnaire design will be described before turning to details of our research program.

2.1. The Pevensey WES CV questionnaire

Willis and colleagues, in agreeing to participate with English Nature in this exploration of CV responses, had to find a way of dealing with the very small amount of money that households contributed to the WES. ‘The cost of the Pevensey Levels WES to households is approximately £0.01 or £0.02 per year, depending on the tax position of the respondent; CV studies do not attempt to elicit and predict which households will pay such small amounts and which will not’ (Willis et al., 1996, p. 390). Such small amounts would possibly encourage respondents to give substantially higher WTP figures than would normally be the case. The questionnaire was designed to try to avoid this problem through the design of the WTP question as a bidding game (Willis et al., 1996, p. 390). Questionnaire sections explored opinions about the environment — countryside and habitat preferences and the Pevensey Levels (recreational and other uses) — before moving into the valuation sequence, and ending with socio-economic information. A four-page information brochure which included maps, colored photographs of the Levels ‘with WES’ and ‘without WES’, and sketches of characteristic plants, birds and animals was given to the respondent before they were asked the valuation questions.

The valuation sequence opened with question 9: ‘You pay for the Wildlife Enhancement Scheme in the Pevensey Levels [authors’ note: hereafter WES…] through taxes (income tax, VAT, excise duty, etc.). For most households this payment amounts to a few pence a year. If you had your own way, would you still be willing to pay for the WES…?’ If the answer was yes, question 10 began the WTP sequence: ‘Bearing in mind that whatever you say you’d spend on this scheme could not be spent on anything else, would your household be willing to pay an additional amount in tax towards the WES…?’ Those respondents who answered yes were then asked question 11. ‘Recall that the majority of households pay a few pence a year for the WES… Baring in mind that there are many worthwhile nature conservation programs in England which you might wish to support, what is the MAXIMUM your household would be willing to pay for the WES… compared with today? Twice as much? Three times as much? Four times as much…?’ Each respondent ‘played’ the game with the interviewer until the maximum sum which she or he was willing to pay was reached. The game also allowed for ‘don’t know’ and ‘refusal to answer’ responses (see Willis et al., 1995, pp. 33–39; Willis et al., 1996, pp. 390–392 for full details).
2.2. The design of the qualitative research

The qualitative research was conducted primarily with samples of respondents after they had completed the CV questionnaire. The main technique employed was the in-depth discussion group (Burgess et al., 1988a, b) which we have developed over a number of research projects with lay people to explore environmental values, meanings, knowledges and practices (for example, Harrison et al., 1987; Harrison and Burgess, 1994; Burgess et al., 1998; Harrison et al., 1999). In-depth groups entail intensive work with small groups of people who meet weekly over a number of weeks to explore issues of common concern. As the group develops, its members come to trust one another and the researchers, to feel comfortable about sharing and exploring meanings and feelings, and about contesting the views of others. The conductor sets the topics for the meetings. But, that apart, her role is confined to keeping people broadly to the topic, maintaining a congenial, supportive and reflexive atmosphere, and clarifying and explaining technical issues. The group explores the topics and the issues members raise in its own way.

For the Pevensey research, we recruited two in-depth groups from amongst respondents to the CV survey. Three categories of respondent had been sampled: households inside or on the boundary of the Pevensey Levels; households located outside the Levels and who had not visited them during the previous year; and households who had visited the Levels (Willis et al., 1996, p. 392). Following this sampling strategy, we subsequently recruited individuals who had answered the CV questionnaire into discussion groups. Recruitment to the in-depth groups aimed primarily to ensure that the full range of WTP figures, from refusals to pay anything extra through to 1000 times more than is currently paid, were represented amongst the members. One in-depth group was formed from residents living in and around the Pevensey Levels (PRG), a second in-depth group was composed of people living 50 km east of the Levels in Maidstone, Kent (MRG).

It was not practical to organize an in-depth group for the third category of respondent to the CV survey (visitors) because they came from many localities. This meant that a different approach had to be adopted. The CV questionnaire was administered by face-to-face interviews at respondents’ homes and one of us (Clark) was trained as an interviewer by the consultants. She audio-recorded her interviews with two categories of visitor sampled in the CV survey: general visitors holidaying at a caravan park adjacent to the Levels, and visitors who had paid to join a specialist nature walk on the Levels. On completing the questionnaire, these respondents were immediately debriefed and their comments were audio recorded. Finally, we recruited a focus group (VFG) from amongst the participants who went on the specialist walk. Focus groups, unlike in-depth groups, usually meet only once and the agenda which they follow is much more closely controlled by the moderator (Krueger, 1994).

Recruitment of in-depth and focus group members began with an invitation to all survey respondents. At the end of the CV questionnaire people were asked if they were interested in joining a group to discuss further the questionnaire and any issues it raised for them. Potential group members were categorized on the basis of their stated WTP figures and where there was a choice (for example, many more respondents bid $2 \times$ than bid $1000 \times$) the age and gender balance of the group was considered. Our ‘first choices’ were telephoned to find out if they were still interested and able to attend the four consecutive, weekly meetings of the group. If so, a face-to-face interview followed, in order to explain the commitment that joining the group entailed. If the individual withdrew, the second choice for that WTP figure was approached, and so on. Of the 161 residents interviewed in the Pevensey Levels area, 63 expressed an interest in participating in the group and we recruited a total of eight people for the group. Fewer households in Maidstone were sampled in the CV survey, giving us less choice in terms of recruitment. Of 56 respondents, 28 expressed an interest in joining a group and six were recruited to the MRG. Each in-depth group met four times for an hour and a half over 4 consecutive weeks, and followed the same agenda (Table 1). The groups were moderated by Burgess and Clark; the discussions were audio-taped and professionally transcribed for discourse analysis.
With the visitors we were rather more restricted. Of the 30 who attended the specialist walk, ten agreed to complete the CV questionnaire at a later date. Each was subsequently interviewed at home, and seven of them were able to join the focus group. The preponderance of older members reflects the age range of those who attended the walk, but nonetheless, the VFG also comprised respondents who had given a variety of WTP figures. The VFG met once for an hour and a half. Discussion focused closely on people’s reactions to the CV questionnaire, the meanings of their WTP figures and whether they felt that these adequately reflected their values. As with the two in-depth groups, the VFG was moderated by Burgess and Clark, and the discussion was recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The three groups’ discussions and the visitors’ debriefing comments provide the voices on which much of the rest of this paper is based. Within each group context, every member was given the opportunity to say what they, as an individual, had thought about the WTP question at the time of the survey; what their WTP figure meant; and what issues, if any, the WTP process raised for them. But the groups were much more than a platform for individuals. The group meetings represented a forum where understandings of, and feelings about the process of economic valuation of nature could be shared, and the system of knowledge production embodied in CV collectively interrogated.

There were many strands in the groups’ debates about the appropriateness of the CV technique for representing their values for nature conservation. There was discussion about the acceptability of asking people to encapsulate their personal values for nature through a monetary figure, and about the propriety of the CV procedure. This was interwoven with debate about issues such as the extent to which it is possible for lay people to make a judgement about one local scheme in isolation from others in other parts of the country; about who or what kind of institution would be best suited to make decisions about the allocation of resources to nature conservation; and

Table 1
The sequence of group discussions *

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pevensey group (PRG)</th>
<th>Maidstone group (MRG)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Topic for discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.2.94</td>
<td>Introductions, the locality, nature and place-based interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Members given Brochure to take home for the week]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.2.94</td>
<td>The Information Brochure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>{Each member of the group invited to describe her/his own reactions to the brochure, before opening up for general discussion}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[Members given copy of CV questionnaire to take home for the week]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3.94</td>
<td>The Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>{Each member of the group invited to describe her/his own reactions to the questionnaire, before opening up for general discussion}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3.94</td>
<td>The WES, local environmental politics, and winding up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Note: although each group followed the same sequence of topics, it is an integral part of the methodology that groups are free to pursue their discussions in ways that are salient to themselves.
about the norms of social science practice in the design and application of questionnaires. Analysis of the discussions concentrates on three main themes which emerged from these debates: first, to compare what different individuals say about particular issues; second, to explore how these issues are constructed; and third, to consider consensus and disagreement between group members. Where apposite, we provide direct quotations from the discussion transcripts. Tables 2–4 summarize the range of comments that individuals made about their WTP figure and the WTP question, along with comments made about monetary valuation in general.

3. Results: respondents talk about their WTP figures

It is a rather cold and blustery March evening with the wind whipping across the Pevensey marshes from the sea. Seated around a table in a timber-beamed room above the bar in a Sussex pub are eight men and women who have got to know one another quite well over the last three weeks. The group are discussing how they tackled the WTP question. Argument, especially between long-time residents of the Levels such as Keith and Meg and incomers like Christopher, has been swirling back and forth for over an hour. Jacquie asks a direct question:

Jacquie: Can you say that a sum of money is a way of expressing what the Marshes are worth to you?

Meg: No.

Greg: It’s not a very good measurement but it’s probably the only way we’ve got. Because — ‘For a thousand pounds, would you be prepared to see the Marshes go?’ The answer’s ‘no!’ You perhaps wouldn’t want to see it, particularly those that lived there, perhaps more so for those who live there. I don’t know. But you, perhaps, would think that a thousand pounds would be very short change.

Meg: The trouble is — I think that if you feel passionately about something, it’s difficult to put a monetary value on it. And I think perhaps somebody who doesn’t feel impassioned about the Levels and its importance, perhaps they’re the only people who could. The only people who could actually think seriously about putting a monetary value on it. Because I think to most people who care passionately about something, like most passion, it’s beyond monetary value. It goes onto a different level, doesn’t it?

Carol: Yes.

Meg: And you can’t, it’s almost obscene to start contemplating… [fades]

Malcolm: Well, you’re talking our very existence, really. [agreement] If you’re talking about the environment, then there isn’t a price because it is your life, really. Our future life.

Meg: And, I mean, diversity is so important to nature and without diversity it will not self-perpetuate and it will become, um, sterile eventually [agreement]. And, I mean, I think that’s inevitable. Well that is the reality. That’s why nature is diverse, because it’s, it’s all built on relationships. And every time you destroy one creature, you’re destroying the relationships between that and other species, and altering the micro-environment. And, I mean, it’s, it’s an ongoing situation. So it’s not just about the Levels. It’s about much broader issues. I don’t think you can put a price on that.

Christopher: That’s what I meant when I was talking to Barry. That there is somebody there who isn’t looking at their ‘pride and joy’. And they’re looking nationally. And it’s not, it’s not a financial thing. But they’re looking at relatively how important things are. And saying: ‘yes, we can give away this little patch here’ and that. And it’s only when that little patch starts to encroach into what’s important to you that it becomes your local problem.

Carol: Isn’t this, I mean, it’s a much bigger issue than all this, isn’t it really? Because this money business. Now everything [emphasis] has to have a price on it [agreement]. So we’re told. I mean, I think it’s rubbish! But I’ll be quite honest. When I was asked that question, because of the financial situation my husband and myself are in, my answer was ‘No, I couldn’t afford to give anything [emphasis] extra’. Because at the moment we’re stretched to our limits. Because of losing jobs and that sort of thing. So, I then
missed the bidding, which I was quite pleased about! [laughter]. But... [fades]

**Meg:** But the trouble is — that would be, that could be misinterpreted, couldn’t it?

**Carol:** Absolutely. Absolutely. That’s right.

**Meg:** As if you don’t want it, you don’t care.

**Carol:** But having said that — what good would it be if I had said ‘oh yes, I’d give a thousand pounds?’ I mean, in isolation that is absolutely no good anyway, is it? And it’s a pity that everything has to have a monetary value. It comes back to greed [emphasis] and all that. It’s just our whole culture at the moment. And it needs people to stick up and say ‘we cannot put a price on this. It’s priceless — but that’s no reason for building on it’.

**Meg:** So somebody can make a quick buck.

**Christopher:** But you could have even greater problems, potentially, if you like. If everybody who was interviewed was so passionate about this area. And they all said they’d give too much. When they came to ask for it and they didn’t have it to give — then what would happen? [pause, followed by laughter].

**Carol:** That comes back to answering this honestly, doesn’t it?

**Meg:** Not pretending you’re some great giver, just to impress the interviewer!

**Christopher:** But if you thought ‘yeah, I am really keen on it. You know, I do want this. It is very, very important to me’ — which for most of you it is. But when it comes to it and it’s not out of your pocket — it’s all, it’s done locally or however this money’s obtained. But other people feel passionately about other things. And so you’re committed to paying for those things. And then you’ve got an awful lot of money going in there. It doesn’t, it can’t be given because it no longer exists — because it’s going to so many, or coming in so often, that it’s just not there. And so all this money that was promised to farmers, or promised to the management, or whoever’s going to look after these things, isn’t there. And it just all falls flat on its face [agreement].

**Keith:** You see, there’s so few people that take any interest in it [reflective pause]. (Extract, 3rd meeting, PRG, 3.3.94, lines 1489–1637.)

This extract is not only illustrative of an in-depth group in action. It also includes references to many issues that concerned the Pevensey Residents’ group, issues that recurred many times over the 6 h of discussion. How do you calculate WTP? What does it mean to the authorities who own the questionnaire? Is it a good way of encoding values? Should nature be thought about in these terms?

### 3.1. A question to be struggled with

Most of our informants had put a lot of effort into trying to answer the WTP question honestly rather than just inventing a number. But context was clearly problematic, for when faced with the WTP question, the 21 participants in the three groups had anchored their responses in a variety of ways (Tables 2–4). One, Ray (MRG), refused to answer on the grounds that no context was given; he said he ‘needed to know a lot more’. Nine reported idiosyncratic reasons for answering in the way they did. Keith (PRG) and Bob (MRG) both failed to find a context, cheerfully admitting that they had not really understood the question, while Daniel (MRG) thought that he was contributing to environmental causes in general. Carla (MRG) and Barry (PRG) seem to have just come up with a number. Susan (VFG) had wondered how to compare the Levels with other nature conservation areas that she was concerned about, while Norman (VFG) compared his use of the Levels with his use of other areas. Malcolm (PRG) tried to think in terms of the global sum that would be forthcoming if everyone contributed but Laura (MRG) did not see that any money was needed in the first place — ‘I thought wetlands looked after themselves’ — and quite consistently bid zero extra.

The other 11 individuals contextualised the WTP question in terms of their individual financial circumstances but even so there were differences in how they operated within this constraint. All indicated that, at the time of the interview, they had related what they would be willing to pay to what they thought they could afford. But, for example, Carol (MRG) said she really could not afford to pay anything extra, while to Greg (PRG) and Derek (VFG) the sum seemed too small to matter so they could easily afford it. Wilfred (VRG) cited a sum he felt he could afford
Table 2
Summary of individual residents’ comments about their WTP figures and monetary valuation, extracted from the Pevensey residents (PRG) discussions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group member a</th>
<th>WTP figure b</th>
<th>Comments made in the group discussions c</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christopher (25–34; civil engineer; £20–30k)</td>
<td>Refused</td>
<td>I struggled with the money business because there are so many competing claims and I’ve come to the view that I need to contribute nationally and then have somebody to even it all out for me. I didn’t like the questions. I wasn’t happy answering them. I couldn’t place what it was really asking. Someone has to make decisions but it shouldn’t be on monetary value alone. It’s to make sure the wildlife goes on surviving, regenerating, giving green space for the earth to develop, rather than just for us to go and enjoy it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol (45–54; parish clerk; £7.5–9k)</td>
<td>0 x</td>
<td>I said I couldn’t afford to pay anything at the moment because of our financial situation but that’s not a measure of how important the Levels are to me. We cannot put a price on nature. It’s priceless.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barry (45–54; retired automotive engineer £15–20k)</td>
<td>2 x</td>
<td>I didn’t think much about the money question, because to me that was an open your cheque book and sign a blank cheque. It’s a totally disgusting idea. You can’t put a price on the environment. You can’t put a price on what you are going to leave for your children’s children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy (35–44; youth employment trainer; £30–40k)</td>
<td>3 x</td>
<td>That few pence a year and how many times — I found that really difficult. But I think it was what I could afford. If you pay money you have the right to see where that money is being spent, and is it being spent wisely. We have to make choices but on the basis of full knowledge. You can’t judge one case in isolation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg (45–54; electronics engineer; £10–15k)</td>
<td>4 x</td>
<td>It was such a small amount. I mean, two times what? Nature is not ours to sell. The only answer is to become a much more political animal and bend the ears of MPs so the government would know that there would be such an uproar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meg (45–54; social work administration; £10–15k)</td>
<td>10 x</td>
<td>I said an amount for me but I would have probably said that I wouldn’t mind paying fifty pounds a year but to do it by how many times I found really difficult. It fills me with horror to think we all might have been unemployed and said we couldn’t have afforded to pay even if we wanted to. Putting a price on nature is immoral. Species are irrepeaceable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malcolm (45–54; carpenter; £15–20k)</td>
<td>100 x</td>
<td>I thought you’ve got to think in terms of everyone’s five pounds. If everybody in the area paid five pounds the farmers are going to get a lot of money. That way of thinking, it’s not really on is it? You can’t put nature on the Stock market. It’s our very existence. It’s our future. Any open space should be valued. It should be legislated, so decisions are made that way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith (55–64; self employed agricultural engineer; refused to state household income)</td>
<td>1000 x</td>
<td>I didn’t really understand what she was on about to be honest. I don’t mind paying my fair share but I’d much prefer to pay somebody who’s going to do something with it. I think this taxing from individuals won’t work. We would do better to get the money for the conservation people to purchase the marshes. You can’t trust the government to protect nature, even when you do pay taxes for them to do so.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a This column provides pseudonyms, age group, occupation and household income group.
b WTP figures are expressed in terms of what respondents were already paying, as explained in the main text. ‘Refused’ means the respondent was willing to pay more but refused to give a figure.
c These comments are drawn from answers given in response to a direct question which was answered by each group member at the start of session 3 (see Table 3) and from discussion during the four meetings.
Table 3
Summary of individual non-residents’ comments about their WTP figures and monetary valuation, extracted from the Maidstone residents (MRG) discussions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group member</th>
<th>WTP figure</th>
<th>Comments made in the group discussions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ray (55–64; retired civil servant Ministry of Defence, £10–15k)</td>
<td>Refused</td>
<td>I thought that’s a question that cannot be answered. I didn’t answer it. I needed to know a lot more. To ask your specific interest, and what you would pay, I don’t think most people often think about nature in those terms. Nature’s part of the web of human life; so it’s very difficult to put that sort of monetary value on it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura (45–54; unemployed; £20–30k)</td>
<td>0 ×</td>
<td>I was surprised to find that money was going to this scheme. My first inclination was to say no. I think it needed a more direct approach, don’t hoodwink us with this kind of questionnaire. It’s the value of the countryside but the actual cost of it can’t be defined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla (35–44; primary school teacher; £20–30k)</td>
<td>2 ×</td>
<td>I found the money question impossible to answer. I tried to be positive, I think I did try to gild the lily a little. You don’t know what’s on the next page: would you put your hand in your pocket for this, and this, and this? You can’t take one area in isolation very easily. We have to prevent the loss of species and stop being selfish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob (45–54; retired sales representative, £15–20k)</td>
<td>3 ×</td>
<td>I think my answer was more defensive because I didn’t really understand exactly what they were talking about. That WTP question — you need more explanation, you’re not actually qualified to say exactly how much, whether it should be twice, three times. I think you can put a value on nature but not a value in monetary terms. A value is what we teach our children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John (55–64, social worker, £40–50k)</td>
<td>100 ×</td>
<td>I must admit I discussed that with my wife because I found it a bit difficult to do. I was surprised that I was prepared to spend a bit of money on Pevensey. If someone said OK, now put your money where your mouth is, I would. Paying farmers to do something rather than not doing something must be good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel (25–34, retail shop manager, £10–15k)</td>
<td>500 ×</td>
<td>The way it came across was that it would be for all environmental needs. So I very willingly said fine, increase the taxes, go on, if it’s saving the planet. Without all the information you can’t get the real answer. Surely it’s better to conserve it now than pay the cost of trying to replace it in future years?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* See footnotes to Table 2.
### Table 4
Summary of individual visitors’ comments about their WTP figures and monetary valuation, extracted from the visitors debriefing and focus group (VFG) discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group member a</th>
<th>WTP figure b</th>
<th>Reactions to debriefing question and comments in the focus group discussion c</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Betty (65–74; retired nurse; £10–15k)</td>
<td>Refused</td>
<td>I think that’s an impossible question. How can I possibly say how much when it’s in the future? I don’t think I have any means of knowing the value. It’s very important to me that these areas are preserved but I don’t know what the relevant costs are. I would pay the earth if I could afford to. But you can’t really value it can you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan (55–64; retired, medical lab technician; £5–7.5k)</td>
<td>2 ×</td>
<td>It’s difficult to say if what I said I was willing to pay is an accurate figure. It’s difficult to quantify and difficult to compare with these other areas that concern me. You can’t put a money figure on your values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin (35–44; farmer; refused to state household income)</td>
<td>2 ×</td>
<td>I think the Levels are worth more that I would be willing to pay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek (65–74; retired administrator; £7.5–10k)</td>
<td>10 ×</td>
<td>The amount you quoted that we were already paying seemed so low that I was quite happy to say I’d pay twenty times [sic] that amount because that would be infinitesimal wouldn’t it? I’ve often thought that specific areas such as Pevensey Marshes and things like this — they should have some sort of scheme where they are virtually preserved for all time. I don’t think a money value comes into it. The money I agreed to pay is probably not a good measure of what preserving Pevensey Levels is worth to me. It’s what I would pay to preserve Pevensey Levels but the question was a bit nebulous because it didn’t give the context. You can’t quantify a field full of orchids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvette (55–64; retail shop manager; £20–30k)</td>
<td>20 ×</td>
<td>The money I agreed to pay is probably not a good measure of what preserving Pevensey Levels is worth to me. It’s what I can perhaps afford bearing in mind all the other charities which I support. And I presumed that there were other people who would pay for other places. How does the government get away with destroying SSSIs? It has to be conserved for what it is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norman (35–44; fireman; £15–20k)</td>
<td>100 ×</td>
<td>I don’t go there that often. If I was going every day I’d pay more. I’d like to see all this area conserved but I can’t say well, the Pevensey Levels, it’s better than Rye. You can fill in all the questionnaires you want, and then they say oh yeah that’s very interesting and, choonk, it’s gone. At the end of the day there are people so powerful they just overrule everything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilfred (75+; retired civil engineer; £15–20k)</td>
<td>Over 1000 ×</td>
<td>I think the money I said is an accurate measure but my problem is I can think of dozens more round the country and I’d dearly love to spend the same amount on each. But I wouldn’t have that amount of cash. I looked at it on the basis of what I would pay to preserve Pevensey Levels but the question was a bit nebulous because it didn’t give the context. You can’t quantify a field full of orchids. This government says to hell with anything that doesn’t make money.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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* This column provides names pseudonyms, age group, occupation and household income group.

* WTP figures are expressed in terms of what respondents were already paying, as explained in the main text. This was expressed in the original survey as ‘a few pence a year’ on the assumption that the actual figure — £0.01/£0.02 pence a year — would induce overgenerous estimates of WTP (Willis et al., 1996, p. 390). ‘Refused’ means the respondent was willing to pay more but refused to give a figure.

* These comments are drawn from answers to one of the debriefing questions (‘Is your WTP figure an accurate measure of what preserving wildlife on the Pevensey Levels is worth to you?’) and from the focus group discussion.
but commented that he would not also have the cash for the many other schemes that he would like to support. Yvette (VRG) and Christopher (PRG) both considered what they might want to contribute to other charities. Yvette responded with a WTP figure while Christopher refused to state how much extra he would pay because he was too uncertain as to what those other charitable demands might be. Betty’s (VFG) refusal was similarly based; how could she know what she would be able to afford in the future?

Another difficulty which concerned group members was how to work out WTP for one project in isolation. People agreed that the value of any particular scheme could only be determined relationally. Acknowledging their lack of scientific expertise and their limited knowledge of the national picture, people felt it was impossible for them to make a meaningful judgement about the worth of the Pevensey scheme in relation to the large number of probably equally worthy schemes around the country. They were just not ‘qualified’, as Bob (MRG) put it.

Despite having to struggle with the WTP question, group members reported that they took the survey seriously and were concerned about the truthfulness of their answers. In part, this reflected a belief that the questions being asked were important in some way for the area and/or for nature conservation — this was how the survey had been introduced to them. However, people’s willingness to answer also reflected the authoritative nature of questionnaire surveys. When an interviewer asks a question, respondents have to assume it makes sense. To think otherwise would mean challenging the authority of the survey because experts do not normally ask nonsense questions. So the meaningfulness of the WTP question was not doubted at the time. However, as the in-depth groups progressed, the soundness of the WTP question began to be challenged.

### 3.2. A good measure of what conserving the Levels is worth?

As the groups slowly unraveled the WTP question, it became clear that most individuals felt that the WTP figure they had given was not a good measure of what conserving the Levels was actually worth to them. Some people, having had time to reflect, indicated this explicitly. For example, Derek (VFG) and Meg (MRG) would have provided figures different to those given at the time, while Daniel (PRG) would have refused to answer. Others elaborated their uncertainty more normatively, questioning whether nature could be meaningfully valued in monetary terms, as illustrated in Meg and Carol’s exchange in the extract above. Further evidence of respondents’ lack of confidence in the validity of their WTP figures comes from the debriefing the caravanners immediately after they had answered the survey. Of 31 respondents asked directly if they felt that the amount that they had agreed to pay (bids ranged from 0 to 100) was a good measure of what conserving wildlife on the Pevensey Levels was worth to them, 19 answered ‘no’, six answered ‘yes’ and the remainder were unsure or avoided the question. Moreover, 25 agreed that the Levels should be conserved regardless of what they had said they were willing to pay.

### 3.3. Should nature be valued in monetary terms?

There was a feeling of moral outrage, especially strong in the VFG and the PRG, that a monetary sum was being used as a measure of what individuals saw as their ethical and moral values for nature. Group members were at pains to distinguish the economic value of land (when traded as private property or utilized for tourism, for example) from the much more significant issue of values of nature itself, and nature’s contribution to quality of life, now and in the future. The comments in Tables 2–4 illustrate the sorts of arguments individuals used in the groups’ discussions. A refusal to accept that it was proper to put a money value on nature and convictions such as the right of nature to exist and its fundamental importance for humanity, now and in the future, found consensus in all three groups. Bob (MRG) captured this ethos of resistance to the commodification of nature when he said: ‘I think you can put a value on nature but not a value in money terms. A value is what we teach our children.’ Similarly, Ray (MRG) expressed just how foreign the idea of valuing nature in monetary terms was to group members: ‘I don’t think most people often think about nature in those terms.’
3.4. An acceptable way of representing respondents’ values?

None of the group members felt that asking individuals how much they were willing to pay for the WES was a satisfactory way of supporting choices about the allocation of resources for nature conservation. The PRG, deeply anxious about the rate and scale of environmental and social changes in the locality, could not shake off the notion that the questionnaire was asking about a voluntary contribution — which they construed as a kind of ‘local tax’. What would happen if people refused to pay? As Meg comments in the opening extract, that could be misconstrued as simply not caring. Barry, deeply and passionately attached to the Levels, commented on his feelings about doing the questionnaire: ‘…you say to yourself, my goodness what have we sat back and watched happen and done nothing about? Just lived our lives. It left me feeling quite sad at the end of it.’ Members of the MRG could empathize with such concerns, having similar feelings about rapid change in their own area, but were much more detached from the Pevensey locality than members of the PRG. For them, the nub of the argument was that conservation is fundamentally important to the web of life. The fact that the Levels would be viewed by many as a flat, boring and unattractive landscape, the group argued, makes it more difficult for outsiders to see its nature conservation values. But they would not therefore necessarily challenge the expert view that it has value and should be protected. ‘It’s the role of government to look after the stuff we don’t particularly always think about’, as Ray (MRG) put it. All in all, considerable doubt was expressed about how effective nature conservation policies would be if decisions were to be made on the basis of people’s ill-informed or subjective preferences for particular places, as implied by the CV methodology.

Despite concerns about the extent to which government could be trusted to protect nature, there was consensus in all three groups that decisions about such things should be made by government, advised by experts who had an understanding of relative claims of different places and different nature conservation schemes, and based on national standards. As Malcolm (PRG) said: ‘you can’t put it [nature] on the stock market, really. It’s our very existence. It’s our future’ [pause]. ‘That’s why the lead has got to come from the gray men, really.’ People recognized that emotional attachment to their particular place makes it very difficult to reach a fair decision and that what is needed is ‘the cool eye of the uninvolved’, as Christopher (PRG) put it. There was concern about the need for local knowledge and local values to be communicated from the grassroots to decision makers but, unequivocally, people felt that the CV was not an appropriate mechanism for doing so. At the same time, there was very little evidence of people engaging in romantic idealizations of nature preserved at all costs, even if nature itself was seen as priceless. Group members acknowledged that hard choices between limited resources do have to be made. What they challenged was that these decisions should be based on individual or consumer preferences. The issue for them was not monetary valuation but value for money. Was the WES the best way of conserving the wildlife and landscape of the Levels?

3.5. An acceptable process?

Doubts about what WTP figures would be used for, suspicion about who ‘owned’ the CV survey, and feelings that people had been somehow duped into taking part, grew over the life of the two in-depth groups. The questionnaire had been presented as a survey on nature and nature conservation and at the time of their interviews members of both groups took this statement at face value. But people were not told what their WTP would be taken to mean, or what would happen to the results of the survey. As Malcolm (PRG) asked in the group: ‘Are they actually evaluating it by how much in pounds and pence that we are actually quoting? Are they, are they putting a monetary value on it or are they using the monetary value that we put on it as a degree of importance?’ Several people commented that it had occurred to them at the time that there might be ‘a hidden agenda’ (as Daniel (MRG) put it) but they could
not pin down what it was. When the groups were
told how WTP figures are analyzed and what the
results might mean to economists or decision-
makers, a number of individuals expressed anger
and distress, feeling that they had been manipu-
lated. That their responses might be used in a way
which they had not anticipated and did not sub-
scribe to broke the implicit contract of trust be-
tween surveyor and surveyed. Laura seemed to
speak for all when she said: ‘I think a more direct
approach, really. You know, more up front. Don’t sort of hoodwink us, you know...’

The MRG, in a sophisticated debate about
democracy, also questioned why people should be
asked to inform decisions about nature conserva-
tion but not decisions about other publicly funded
goods. If decision makers really wanted people’s
views then, as Bob (MRG) said, ‘it’s got to be
what we’re prepared to pay for everything, hasn’t
it? What we’re prepared to pay for defense. What
we’re prepared to pay for jobs.’ As that was
clearly not the case, people felt justified in their
cynicism about the sincerity of the ‘owners’ of the
questionnaire (seen to be the government) and to
what use the results would be put (see Harrison et
al., 1998).

4. A challenge to contingent valuation: discussion

The twin issues of the validity of WTP figures
and the acceptability of representing people’s val-
ues in this way are fundamental to the legitimacy
of CV as a tool for informing policy. Within the
paradigm of environmental economics, validity
seems to refer to the extent to which the monetary
value produced by a CV is ‘the ‘true’ value of the
asset under investigation’ in an absolute sense,
with deviations being perceived as caused by bi-
ases of various kinds (Bateman and Turner 1993,
p. 146; their quotation marks). However, as Ad-
discott et al. (1995) argue, the concept of validity
comes from the Latin validus, meaning strong,
which is ‘usually defined in relative terms or in
respect of our requirements’, and so validity sig-
nifies not so much absolute truth as notions of
‘well-founded and applicable’ and ‘against which
no objection can be fairly brought’ (p. 806). Our
informants called into question both the bases
and relevance of their WTP figures, so casting
doubts on the validity of the figures elicited in the
WES CV survey.

We make no claims as to the representativeness
of group members in the sense that our findings
could be used to make quantitative inferences.
Qualitative research produces a different kind of
empirical information to that extracted from a
closed questionnaire. But there are some poten-
tially significant difficulties in making claims
about the extent to which our research results
pose a general challenge to CV. We used ethnog-
ographic methods to work intensively with a small
sample of respondents to the WES CV survey and
although the sampling strategy embodied the full
range of WTP figures elicited, the participants
could be atypical. Between 40 and 50% of respon-
dents expressed interest in joining an in-depth
discussion group; but it is unlikely that individu-
als without any interest in nature conservation
would have volunteered. Another complication is
context, in the sense of the particularities of place,
people and events which are fundamental to the
interpretation of meanings. Context is always id-
osyncratic to some extent as the local social,
cultural and geographic context inevitably shapes
people’s discourses and social practices. It remains
possible that something in the context of our
study was so peculiar as to render its findings
exceptional.

Moreover, each CV instrument is different in its
combination of the scenario, the ‘good’ being
valued, the information provided, the method of
elicitation of WTP, the proposed payment vehicle
and the conduct of the survey. And just as the
context might have been idiosyncratic, so might
some aspect of the WES CV survey (for example,
the sort of scenario or the type of good) make
generalization inappropriate. Further, some flaw
in the survey could have procured particular re-
results which are not susceptible to extrapolation.
The designers of the WES CV study have stated
that ‘wherever possible NOAA recommendations
were adopted’ (Willis et al., 1996, p. 391), al-
though the policy context did undoubtedly con-
strain the form of the WTP question (see Garrod
and Willis, 1999). The underlying argument here
is that just as poor survey design would produce dubious WTP figures, so poor survey design would have a significant effect on respondents’ perceptions and understandings of CV as a process. This is an interesting proposition but we do not believe that the former necessarily implies the latter. Our study was designed to draw out perceptions and understandings in such a way as to ensure that even if there were flaws in the WES CV they would not undermine our research. The design and conduct of the in-depth groups meant that participants had many hours in which to discuss the questionnaire, the information brochure, and the principles underpinning CV. Members recognized that the assumptions and values inherent in the WTP approach remained, regardless of the particular survey they were involved in.

Given that the wider extension of our findings could be compromised by atypicality, peculiarities of context or the particularities of the WES CV survey, one way to evaluate their more general robustness is to look at the findings of any comparable studies. Ideally, we would compare studies that used other qualitative methods to probe the WES CV, and studies that replicated our approach with different CV instruments. But few researchers have attempted qualitatively to probe CV from the respondents’ perspectives, and the limited number of studies which have done so have used different methodologies and different instruments. Three published studies have explored respondents’ perceptions and opinions during/after CV surveys.

The verbal protocol method used by Schkade and Payne (1994) explored the thought processes of respondents while they completed the Desvousges et al. (1993) central flyway CV questionnaire. In this survey, respondents were presented with a market-oriented solution to the problem of birds killed by waste oil in settling ponds which would require oil companies to cover the ponds with wire netting, and asked how much they would be prepared to pay per year in higher prices for the wire nets. Schkade and Payne (1994) brought 105 members of the public living in Atlanta, Georgia, to a survey research center, trained them in how to verbalize their thoughts and then invited them to complete the self-administered CV. Their research revealed that individuals used ‘many diverse considerations while formulating their responses to the WTP question’ (p. 98). A substantial proportion of the subjects (41%) acknowledged that something should be done about the problem and then tried to decide how much would be needed if every household contributed. About 23% accepted the inevitability of consumers having to pay and then tried to work out an appropriate sum; 17% saw their WTP as a contribution to charity; and 23% were concerned about broader environmental issues and wanted to signal that, which they did in terms of WTP responses significantly higher than the mean for the study. Finally, 20% just made a number up. Respondents were not very confident about their WTP figures. Schkade and Payne reported few examples of individuals thinking about an economic trade-off between the money foregone and the birds, in contrast to the evidence of ‘economic thinking’ found when the verbal protocol method has been applied to CV studies of familiar market commodities.

Vadnjal and O’Connor’s (1994) research concerned how people actually interpreted questions of paying for their view of Rangitoto Island, an important landmark for the city of Auckland. Residents of St Heliers Bay in Auckland were asked how much they would be willing to pay to a trust fund to avoid a (simulated) development on the island. WTP figures varied from nothing to NZ$5000. When the 240 respondents were asked if the amount they specified was ‘an accurate measure of the value to you of continuing protection of View A?’ (the present view of Rangitoto Island) only 23% said ‘yes’ (p. 371). The 185 respondents who said ‘no’ were asked to explain further and, of these, 151 gave an ‘anomalous’ response; that is, a response which indicated that the meaning attached to their WTP figure was not consistent with economic thinking. Debriefing interviews were conducted with these individuals and their explanations were grouped, through content analysis, into five categories: the Island’s uniqueness; its importance for Auckland’s sense of place and personal memories; its value as a common good that belongs to everyone; its aes-
thetic qualities which are beyond price; and the need to protect the Island from destructive development. Vadnjal and O'Connor (1994) concluded that WTP figures could be seen essentially as 'gestures in a political process' (p. 375) representing resistance both to the commodification of places and to a planning process which did not seem to protect valued landscapes.

Most recently, Brouwer et al. (1999) used post-survey focus groups and individual questionnaires to investigate respondents' perceptions and understandings of a large scale CV survey which aimed to determine WTP for a flood alleviation scheme on the Norfolk Broads — an extensive series of lakes and waterways in East Anglia — and so value recreational and amenity benefits that would otherwise be lost. The 52 participants in their research, drawn from respondents to this survey, met within seven focus groups to discuss 'their opinions and views on the survey, the meaning of their answers, the usefulness of their answers for actual decision-making, especially their willingness to pay (WTP) statements and their preferences for the two types of consultation they had been involved in' (p. 3). In this study, the focus groups' members said they were comfortable with their original WTP figures with only one person wanting to make any change. The majority view (in five out of the seven focus groups) was that the overall approach was acceptable. Members' responses to questionnaires they were asked to complete at the end of the 2-h discussion showed that a majority (67%) believed that the results of the CV survey would be useful to decision-makers and felt comfortable (75%) using monetary terms to express the importance they attached to the Broads flood alleviation scheme.

There are similarities and differences between the three studies discussed above and our work in Pevensey. That respondents may well not be thinking as economists assume they ought when responding to a WTP question is clearly supported by Schkade and Payne (1994), Vadnjal and O'Connor (1994) and ourselves. Brouwer et al. (1999) did not investigate how respondents constructed their WTP figures. Whether it matters for CV that respondents might frequently not be considering trade-offs between the benefits of the ‘good’ being valued and spending their money elsewhere is an important question. A failure to engage in ‘economic thinking’ might seem to indicate that real WTPs are less than well-founded in terms of their consistency with the neo-classical economic theory which underpins CV. Pearce (1998) (p. 96), however, citing Kahnemann and Knetsch's (1992) view that WTP represents 'the purchase of moral satisfaction' rather than self-interested 'economic thinking', argues that even if CV does elicit responses that reflect ethical concerns rather than self-interest, this is not a reason to term such responses ‘non-economic’. Others would disagree (Foster, 1997).

On the issue of whether respondents’ WTP figures are valid in the sense of being a well-founded measure of the worth of the ‘good’ in question, the evidence looks mixed. Here, our results accord with Vadnjal and O'Connor's (1994) study. Unfortunately, Schkade and Payne's (1994) research did not approach this issue discursively and offers support only insofar as their informants said they were not very confident of their figures. The Brouwer et al. (1999) reports a different finding in which their informants appear sufficiently confident in their figures to stick to them even when offered the opportunity to adjust them. Similarly, on the acceptability of the CV technique, Vadnjal and O'Connor's (1994) work accords with ours, but only a minority of Brouwer et al.'s (1999) focus groups' members were unhappy about expressing their values in monetary terms or with the use of CV in policy making.

5. Conclusions

The use of more qualitative techniques such as focus groups to assist in the design of CV schedules has grown over the last decade (Desvousges and Frey, 1989; Chilton and Hutchinson, 1999), but it is still rare to find studies using other kinds of qualitative methodologies. Yet addressing valuation through the lens of qualitative research can do what closed questionnaires with pre-ordained sets of responses cannot. It can provide rigorous, empirically grounded insights into how and why
respondents produced the answers that they did (Woodhouse, 1998; Morgan 1988). We have tried to compare our findings with similar studies, but can find nothing directly comparable methodologically. The Schkade and Payne (1994) study was carried out with American citizens, conducted under strict experimental procedures and based on individuals verbalizing their thoughts in isolation to a hypothetical scenario. Vadnjal and O'Connor's (1994) paper was based on a social survey of New Zealand residents who answered additional questions in a CV survey which simulated development on a much-loved local landmark. Brouwer et al.'s (1999) study is closest to our own in cultural context (both set in England, in wetland areas, and assessing specific environmental policies). Brouwer et al.'s research was designed, in part, to test some of our Pevensey findings. More research is needed to clarify reasons for differences between these two studies. One possible explanation may be the nature of the 'good' being valued. Respondents may have found it easier to produce a WTP for a flood alleviation scheme (where the costs and benefits are more easily recognized) rather than monetizing complex cultural values for nature and landscape. Equally, the not insignificant differences between focus and in-depth discussion groups may partly account for the contrasting results.

Qualitative research brings social and cultural perspectives to bear on methodological problems of environmental valuation that have largely been the preserve of economists and social psychologists. In so doing, the Pevensey case study suggests that nature conservation may not be susceptible to contingent valuation (see also Hodge and McNally, 1998). When deconstructed by respondents themselves, their WTP figures proved to have little substance and they unequivocally rejected CV as an acceptable means of representing their values, or views, to decision makers. In the Pevensey case, valuing nature in monetary terms was incommensurable with deeply held cultural values. Environmental economists justify CV on pragmatic grounds; the environment will be more highly valued in decision-making than would otherwise be the case and no better decision aids are available (Pearce et al., 1989; Pearce 1998). But the discussions reported in this paper support many of the arguments about the moral and ethical dimensions of valuing nature which are explored in Foster (1997). In the case of the WES, respondents who participated in our groups had major reservations about the use of WTP to represent their values for nature. Rather, the consensus was that their values for nature would be better upheld through expert judgments and enforced regulatory standards, with appropriate regard for local sensibilities and knowledge. In Brouwer et al.'s (1999) study, respondents were more happy to accept the validity of their WTP. However, the majority also favored a 'participatory deliberative approach to inform the environmental decision-making process' (p. 18). Both studies indicate that people want to contribute meaningfully to decisions concerning their local natural environment. However, they would prefer to do so collectively rather than as isolated individuals, and in fora where they can deliberate such issues as standards, equity, rights and responsibilities, as well as how much money should be allocated to particular projects.

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