



The Nature Institute

Dear Friends,

Writing this letter once a year in the midst of New England's autumn colors, we find it hard not to repeat previous exclamations about the gorgeous brilliance of the display. But a rather contrary thought arises now, thanks to a pair of polarizing sunglasses I (Steve) was wearing a day or two ago while walking through the wooded countryside. These glasses made the oranges and reds much brighter and redder, and the blues even a deeper blue than what the naked eye perceives.

This raises an interesting question: is it just the colors as such that we marvel at in the autumn foliage? If so, why not be content to walk around all the time with glasses that produce one or another sort of dramatic effect—something we can do any time we want? Yet surely most of us would find this thought rather repellent, and would much prefer to take in the sights with our unaided senses. It is worth asking why.

Is it not that nature's performance strikes us as somehow significant? The autumnal show takes place as part of a profoundly life-shaping yearly cycle, and it seems to be saying something to us—or would do so if only we could pick up on it. We find ourselves wanting at least to give the performance a chance—to absorb the message unconsciously through our pores, so to speak, if that is all we can manage. Even a more or less blank sense of wonder is already an appreciation of *something*, despite our not knowing quite what it is. And it can stimulate us toward greater attention and a disciplining of our powers of perception.

But this whole line of thought produces a darker reflection also. For it is evident—as others in our society of screen-delivered experiences have noted—that many people are indeed finding the lure of special effects and artificially produced sensation more powerful than the invitation of unmediated natural phenomena. These phenomena all too easily fade into insignificance beside the ever more vivid productions of our high-tech media labs.

For anyone attentive to the surrounding society today, the problems posed by this situation can seem so overwhelming as to bring on despair. How can nature's voice be heard amid the shrill and compelling Babel of the prevailing media, and how can any of us make a real difference on behalf of the natural world? A rather distant analogy may be relevant, for we can imagine there would have been a similar sense of helplessness among the first-century Christians if they had been asking themselves, "What can we possibly do to combat the presence and might of the Roman empire?" But, apparently, they were more inclined to ask what they could do in their own communities and for their own neighbors. And in the end *that* approach proved more powerful than the Roman armies.

In such reflections, perhaps we may find a guiding thought for our work at The Nature Institute. We can at least continue trying, within our own sphere of influence, to bring people closer to nature—to help them experience the world ever more deeply and profoundly, until it is the artificial reality that pales beside all the riches surrounding us. Might it not be that, in the end, this sort of activity will prove more powerful than the high-tech legions competing to shape our daily experience?

With that hope, we would like to think that this issue of *In Context* is at least a step in the right direction. And we trust you will agree that the articles, each coming from a different angle, bring out aspects of nature, and ways of attending to them, that can lead to genuine appreciation and wonder.

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