



Image courtesy of BBC

As I mentioned in yesterday's post, gorillas are a focus of this year's World Environment Day. There are only about seven hundred mountain gorillas in the wild – fewer than the number of students at most law schools. They're split between a group in the Virunga range of volcanoes and one in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Uganda. Lowland gorillas seem to be in better shape. Little is known about the Eastern lowlanders, but the western ones (with the wonderful scientific name of *Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) are abundant.

Gorillas have a special claim on our attention and goodwill. Yes, I know that every endangered species is unique and irreplaceable. But gorillas are practically *kinfolk*. Their DNA is the same as ours within a couple of percent, and they diverged from our lineage only about seven million years ago. (Or, if you're a creationist, think of it this way: God made them as near replicas of us — He must have had a reason for that.) They use tools, such as a stick for checking on water depth and a stone for smashing nuts. Use of sign language by Koko, a lowland gorilla, is well documented — though this may or may not amount to the use of human language, depending on whether you count use of individual words or demand mastery of grammar. Even their sexuality is similar to ours in some ways — females have a 28 day estrus cycle, and (unlike nearly all other mammals) they sometimes have sex face-to-face. Any way you look at it, they're about as close to human as you can get and still remain another species. They may not be a part of the human family, but they're at least our first cousins.