

Gorilla growth

Scientists have recently made the heartening discovery that there are more gorillas in our midst. But, says Melville-Brown, man should stay well away

Put this magazine down - just for a moment - and look out of the window. You are probably flying over a patchwork section of Mother Nature's beautiful blanket; azure blue seas; sepia savannas; deep ochre desert; or, glorious green forests and jungle.

Have you ever stopped to think about the detail of that elaborate quilt, about who lives there and calls it home? Or, as the environmental alarm bells start to ring more loudly to the tunes of "global warming", "deforestation" and "pollution", is it foolish to imagine that there is much left in nature's diminishing wildest spots?

125,000 'lost' gorillas have been found in the Congo

From headquarters ironically situated in the concrete jungle of New York - the Bronx Zoo to be precise - the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) has some good news.

It runs field projects around the world to inspire care for nature, provide leadership in environmental education and help to sustain the planet's biological diversity. And, in conjunction with the government of the Republic of Congo, a new census presents an amazing discovery. Hidden deep within the Republic, massive numbers of the secretive and critically endangered Western Lowland Gorilla have been found.

While previous estimates put the population at less than 50,000 across the gorillas' range in seven central African countries, just two adjacent areas of the northern part of the Republic is thought to be home to approximately 125,000.

By counting gorilla sleeping nests - nomadic individuals make a fresh nest each night before moving on - greater numbers have been estimated than thought possible. While enemies including disease, poaching and logging operations had pushed known numbers of the gorillas to their long-term survival limit, it seems that large numbers have been able to live in areas of swamp, inaccessible and inhospitable - so far that is - to man. It is hoped that this find may slow down moves to sell off large tracts of land for logging rights and result in more national parks.

The WCS website proudly reports the delight of its CEO and president, Dr Steven E Sanderson, who said: "These figures show that the northern Republic of the Congo contains the mother lode of



gorillas. This discovery should be a rallying cry that we can protect other vulnerable and endangered species, whether they be gorillas in Africa, tigers in India or lemurs in Madagascar."

However, it's not necessarily all good news. The problem for the tigers and the lemurs, and now the gorillas, is that man knows their hiding places. Says WCS chairman David Schif: "Humans are yearning to connect to wildlife and the Wildlife Conservation Society provides that connection in a meaningful way."

Sadly, the only connection that some humans want with wildlife is a financially rewarding one. And, in the case of the Western Lowland Gorilla, that could translate into hunting for bush meat, the killing of hundreds due to deforestation or massacre of thousands by the Ebola virus.

So, don't look out of the window. If man is engaged in a deadly game of hide-and-seek with his fellow creatures, it's best the world puts off hearing the haunting playground words "Ninety-nine, one hundred, coming, ready or not". ■