

September 26, 2008

'MILKING THE RHINO' **** Four Stars

Throughout the fascinating, often beautiful "Milking the Rhino," a song from "Oklahoma" kept popping into my head, the one that goes "oh, the farmer and the cowboys should be friends ..."

In a paraphrased form, that's the message of this documentary, which captures how two remote African communities—the Maasai of Kenya and the Himba of Namibia—are working to balance the principles of conservation with the economic needs of their members.

Chicagoan David Simpson ("Refrigerator Mothers")—"Rhino's" writer, director, producer and editor—details how colonialism disrupted the traditional African relationship of human and beast. (As one Maasai elder says, "The only benefit an animal had was if I would kill it and feed on the meat.") For about a century or so, foreign occupiers followed the American model of national parks, fencing off the animals and displacing the humans who lived within. Culling the herds was reserved for paying foreign tourists, a style of "command and control" conservation, the film's subjects contend, that led to poaching and mistrust. "Rhino's" traditional panoramas, inhabited by majestic lions, giraffes, elephants and other African staples, are complemented by rarely-seen-elsewhere interviews with their human neighbors, who raise cattle that compete for scarce grasses with protected, often destructive African wildlife, and who face great difficulties eking out a life on some hard land. (Bovine casualties of a monthslong drought are among the sights parents should consider before bringing younger viewers to this film.)

But within the last 30 years, the Maasai and the Himba have introduced community-based conservation—managing wildlife populations for the benefit of the humans with whom they coexist—with the hope of drawing tourist trade and sustainable income (the "milking the rhino" of the title). The Il Ngwesi lodge, adjacent to the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, is a Kenyan success story the Himba are hoping to replicate. Though the term "community organizer" has been derided by some of late, I defy any viewers to watch James and John cajole their constituencies into compromise and cooperation and not see an art in their actions.

Running time: 1:25. Plays Sept. 26-30 at the Gene Siskel Film Center.

No MPAA rating (parents cautioned for footage of hunting and its aftermath, animal starvation, nudity).

—Maureen M. Hart

