

# Interview with David E. Simpson

By Betsy Cass, Kartemquin Films Summer Intern

The original interview may be found at  
<http://kartemquin.com/newsletter/2008/08/milking-the-rhino-interview>

## ***Where did the seed, the original idea, for *Milking the Rhino* come from?***

The idea for the film came to me from my co-producer, Jeannie Magill, who has a background in education safaris in Kenya. I think she had taken a class in environmental ethics and became aware of trends in Kenya toward community-based conservation and decided that more people in our Western world needed to know what was going on in community conservation. When she found me I couldn't disagree. It just struck me as a terrific idea for a film, because people in the northern hemisphere are largely unaware of what conservation means nowadays. They're basically thinking of a twenty year out of date model, sometimes known as the fortress model, which means you erect fences around reserves. Most of the conservation world is now of the consensus that for wildlife to survive and to do well in a meaningful way, there has to be some stake in its survival. There has to be some stake for people, rural people, who live amongst them.

## ***Were there any special preparations you went through in making this film, especially pre-production aspects?***

Yeah, it was pretty challenging to get ready for the shoots, because 90% of the filming was done at really remote locations, particularly in Namibia, where we were off the typical safari path, up in areas that aren't easily accessed. You have to drive three days from the capital city to get where these communities are and electricity is rare. You have batteries to charge; you have to find means of transportation. We had to find camping gear. There were stretches where we didn't have a bed to sleep in, so we had to be pretty self-sufficient. Between that and the sometimes tricky visa and filming permit securing processes, in Namibia in particular, there was a lot of pre-production.

## ***Did you have a guide when you were there? Who was responsible for organizing that aspect of it?***

I was responsible for organizing it, but with huge help from Jeannie and our associate producer Xan Aranda. Early on we made a good contact with one NGO that's partially featured in the Namibian story. They're called IRDNC. They're a grassroots, on the ground, field NGO, so they loaned us one of their field people and one of their vehicles and then we had our vehicle as well. They could guide us up to where we needed to go and make introductions to people. Usually the person from this organization had business up there, so they weren't only guides; they became characters. Our main character in Namibia, John, was a field officer for this NGO and is now the assistant director of the place. His work became part of the story.

## ***The film has been discussed as "the other side" of a nature documentary, but a lot of the process of shooting actually looked like it was a little bit similar. Have you ever done anything like that before?***

No, I'd never done any nature or wildlife photography. There are some days when we would focus on wildlife, particularly in Kenya. Out of the 50 shooting days there were probably 3 days that were just dedicated to shooting wildlife. But we weren't quite equipped the way that Planet Earth is. We had a truck and a tripod and a great cameraman. But for me it was always the people who were the focus. It was the way the cultures were undergoing vast, radical transformation because of this new potential in the wildlife economy. That's what was fascinating to me.

## ***I guess this is fairly unusual for documentary, but when you're watching the film, you can really feel the presence of the crew. Was that a conscious decision?***

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## Interview, continued

That's a tough question. I would say that we had no deliberate intention to make ourselves part of the story, nor do I ever want to propagate the myth that this is life captured objectively, because there's no such thing. I think that you can, to some extent, always sense the crew's and the director's relationship to their subject in the way that the subject is interacting: how much they're willing to open up, how they interact with the camera, how they address the camera or the person standing next to it.

***There is some tension in the film, both racial and cultural tension. I was wondering how you built the relationship with your subjects and made it clear you weren't exploiting them.***

I think that the relationship is founded, first of all, on the fact that we were with people from an NGO that were well trusted. You can't find a place on earth, hardly, where film crews haven't been. And if they're extremely remote places, film crews are that much more attracted to them. So you will often find that people in remote places have already had negative experiences with the media or with film crews. We find ourselves having to repair the damage. I hope it also has to do with the fact that they can sense that we're genuinely interested in telling their story from their perspective, which is always the rock bottom goal of the film: to tell what community conservation feels like from the rural African perspective instead of the white conservation perspective, which is the view of every other conservation film I've ever seen. I think that people really did sense that we respected and were interested in their experience.

***The film ends on a hopeful note, with rain (after a long drought), but it doesn't really give much of a sense of closure. Did you feel a sense of uncertainty when you were filming about the future of either your subjects or that sort of grassroots conservation?***

Very much so. The rain is a momentarily upbeat note, but it certainly isn't meant to imply that everything's going to be all peachy keen from here on out. There are a lot of questions about whether those two places (portrayed in the film) will work. So, it's by no means sure that this is a formula that can be prescribed successfully. But what we did feel in terms of a sense of hopefulness, was that there were some really, really committed people, like our two main characters, John and James, who are passionate and committed and smart and are going to try and make things work for these communities in our film. There are, by extension, a lot of other places, committed individuals and committed grassroots NGOs that really want to make this work for the right reasons. But there are a lot of obstacles. In fact, one irony in the Kenya story is that early in the film somebody says, well, "What if we get a drought of tourism like happened after 9/11, when the tourism dried up? Then we're really putting all our eggs in one basket." And it was their own political unrest in Kenya that brought about a horrible drought of tourism, just earlier last year. Tourism just completely dried up in all of the mainstream safari circuits and also for a place like il Ngwesi. They suffered pretty badly, so they are vulnerable to that. But that's what makes it a great story to me. These people are taking a gamble collectively, as a community. Gambling may be the wrong word because it implies a certain irresponsibility. They're making a sort of calculated wager and they're doing it in a pretty sophisticated manner.

***The world premiere is going to be Johannesburg?***

Yeah. It's premiering at this very exciting film festival (the TriContinental Film Festival). It's actually premiering in four different cities. It's going from Jo-burg to Cape Town to Pretoria to Durban. We'll also, when we're in South Africa, be meeting with some potential partners to distribute the film throughout Southern Africa at the community level, doing mobile screenings and get it distributed educationally and more grassroots.

***And finally, what are you working on next?***

I'm still trying to recuperate from this. In some ways finishing the film is the beginning of the next phase.

(July, 2008)