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BY BILL STAMETS

'Milking the Rhino' ★★★

Wild animals, domestic cattle, African herders and Western tourists all interact in David E. Simpson's insightful documentary "Milking the Rhino," the latest from Chicago's Kartemquin Films. Ecology and economics intersect when Africans protect wildlife to attract tourists.

Simpson visits Kenya and Namibia, where pastoral tribes altered traditional ways of grazing their cattle and killing wild animals. Setting aside and patrolling nature preserves restored populations of rhinos, lions and elephants wiped out by poachers, drought and warfare. The building of a comfortable lodge and an upscale camp then increased the number of visitors paying to see cheetahs, waterbucks and giraffes in the wild. "We're milking wildlife, just like a cow," says James Ole Kinyaga, trying to sell a skeptical Kenyan on eco-tourism. A convert to the new economical model gets it, as he pets an adult rhino: "I gave him milk as a baby, and now he is giving it back to us."

Simpson frames a series of fascinating exchanges between friends and foes of this new business model. The anthropological aspects deserve a documentary of their own. Africans joke about seeing their first pink-looking outsiders and wondering if they had been freshly skinned.

A common theme in Kartemquin docs is that making a living is a political matter. Simpson skillfully adapts that perspective to rural Africa, where investing in wildlife links the Masai and others to the new globalism.

No MPAA rating (non-sexual nudity). Running time: 85 minutes. In English, Maa, Otjiherero and Swahili, with English subtitles. Screening at the Gene Siskel Film Center at 8 tonight, Saturday and Tuesday; 5 p.m. Sunday, and 6 p.m. Monday. Simpson and members of his producing team will attend screenings.