Positive film reviews laud David Simpson’s *Milking the Rhino* for its valuable introduction to the conflict between residents of Kenya and Namibia and “conservation,” the protection of wild game that defends species and generates tourism (Coffman 2008, Conklin 2009, Talmor 2010). The present review, however, is not comfortable with *Rhino*’s choice of stories. It challenges *Rhino*’s defense of ecotourism and question its depictions of ethnographic mini-contradictions in place of deeper insights.

For director Simpson, however, the film corrects stereotypes that PBS viewers have about Africa:

Most Westerners see Africa through a haze of reportage about wars, AIDS, poverty, corruption. Rural Africa in particular is viewed as backwards and/or romantically pure. By weaving stories of complex, multi-faceted characters, *MILKING THE RHINO* breaks with stereotype to paint rural Africans as *akina sisi* — “people like us.” (Simpson 2008)

*Rhino*’s approach omits more than HIV/AIDS from its haze of reportage.

Bold graphics dive the viewer into a map of Africa, as a Maasai chorus, accompanied by *film noir* saxophone, segues into a Namibian solo. *Rhino* then pursues its contrast of ecotourism found among the world’s most famous tourist icons, East African Maasai (who number about 900,000) and the rarely visited Namibian Himba (about 12,000). Fatherly narrator-guides explain how both groups sacrifice important resources, grazing and farm land, to provide habitat for photographable “Big 5” game and birds, all for the greater good of tourism.

*Rhino* achieves a semblance of ethnographic intimacy by instigating awkward situations. In one Kenya interview, two unnamed villagers threaten to kill elephants that have destroyed their fields. They angrily assert, “We can use arrows, spears. We can even use … traps.” “Do you want to tell the warden that?” shoots back the film’s Kenya narrator, himself a retired game warden. The villagers’ arrogance evaporates as they realize the imprudence of bragging about breaking laws to a television crew. This problematic confrontation, instigated by the filmmakers, demands more explanation. But the white makers have no interest in developing access to more nuanced and intimate expositions. *Rhino* conceives its canvas as too large to bother with ethnographic particulars.

In a few seconds, another puzzle arrives. “For centuries,” the narrator intones, “people and wild animals have struggled to share this land.” “For centuries? *Homo sapiens* and wild animals have struggled to share East Africa for 200,000 years. Does *Rhino* avoid mentioning pre-Biblical times as a concession to its Creationist viewers? Or is the idea that what happened in East Africa, before Westerners discovered it, isn’t important? The hazy history expands
further as the film fails to mention forced sedentarization, privatization of land and class formation, all affecting tourism and all contributors to the current food and employment crisis of Kenya’s pastoralists (Fratkin, Roth and Nathan 2004).

Instead, *Rhino* introduces viewers to Il Ngwesi, a Maasai-run ecotourism lodge. This, the narrator claims (accompanied by non-Maasai thumb-harp) was built from local materials. Well, its kidney-shaped swimming pool is not local, and the lodge itself looks less like a Maasai compound than the tree house in Walt Disney’s *Swiss Family Robinson*. The film does not mention the lodge’s tours to a “cultural village” (*Il Ngwesi* 2010). But in it, presumably, ochre-dyed Maasai *ilmurran* continue — as they are depicted to do at the lodge — singing to their swimming pools. (See Bruner [2001], Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [1994], Galati [2002] and Thompson and Homewood [2002] for more on essentializing depictions of Maasai culture.)

*Il Ngwesi* employs fewer than one hundred people, but *Rhino* offers it as the exemplar for Maasai subsistence and sustainable conservation —worthy of notice by 20,000,000 PBS viewers. Here, *Rhino* charges deep into fantasy. There are not enough tourists in the world to sustain ecolodge pastoralism in East Africa. The unfortunate reality is that *Il Ngwesi* does not even have enough business to do much good for its own people. Zeppel (2006:122) cites USAID statistics concerning *Il Ngwesi*’s meager achievement:

> In 2000, the lodge hosted 1000 visitors and generated US$85,000 in tourism revenue…. Tourism profits at *Il Ngwesi* support 499 Maasai households and some 6000 people, funding school bursaries, a primary school and three nursery schools, water supplies, health schemes, cattle dips and ranch operations.

We should not assume, given Maasai class formation, that lodge revenues will be distributed equally among the 6,000 residents whom Zeppel mentions. Yet even if they were, each resident would receive less than $15 per year. At the time of this writing, $15 equals about two weeks’ wage for a Maasai night watchman in Dar es Salaam; the annual fees and supplies needed to support one Tanzanian student in a rural residential school are about $500.

For *Rhino*’s viewers deeply to understand the subsistence crisis in East Africa, solutions more practical for pastoralists than feel-good tourism must be discussed. Such solutions include improved educational opportunities, alternatives to migratory night watching jobs, educational media about HIV/AIDS and cattle disease prevention, and interventions to curb intimate partner abuse and alcoholism.

*Rhino* presents related ecotourism sequences in Namibia. The tourist lodge featured there also has a swimming pool, and, though not kidney-shaped, it also extends its pleasures to a pastoralist “cultural village.” In one scene, an outraged Himba women complains about broken promises and lost subsistence caused by the lodge. Unfortunately, the film never returns to her complaints, and the woman’s loss is thus effectively dismissed as collateral damage, a problem resolved by the greater good of tourist dollars. In another scene, a Himba elder speaks before what appears to be a Conservancy-sponsored inquisition, trying to justify the slaying of two lions that threatened his cattle. A white expert responds that lions bring $5,000 each to the Conservancy if the rights to killing them are sold to trophy hunters. Someone in the meeting should have pointed out that trophy hunters were not on hand when the cattle were threatened. When a second speaker tries to defend the first, he is told to shut up because he was fired from the Conservancy for pilfering money. The accusation is followed by a lengthy audio track of
derisive and indulgent laughter. As before, this reportage haze of complaints and corruption is not mentioned again.

The accusation scene provides another example of Rhino-grade, decontextualized ethnography in which anger and the mention of criminal acts are passed on to viewers as intimate insight into opposing views. It doesn’t matter if the accused Himba man really stole money from the Conservancy; it doesn’t matter if half-drunk Kenyan villagers have any real intention of killing elephants: for our purposes, for the Rhino to charge, an accusation is a fact. These men are not “complex, multi-faceted characters,” as Simpson (2008) styles them. They are foils in an edifice of poorly-explored contradictions, present only to add momentum to the film’s realism effect. To be successful, it is said, sitcoms must deliver one laugh every six seconds: this PBS documentary presents roughly the same frequency of ethnographic micro-insights. Its titration level of conflict is ultimately negated by ecotourism, the film’s wish-fulfilling, half-truth solution. Such deceptions in well-funded television ethno-documentaries are not unique: for an analysis of how a Discovery Channel documentary revised Himba ethnographic reality for the convenience of its storyline, see Wärnlöf (2000).

As in Rhino’s Kenya sequences, those about Namibia disregard the public-health consequences of sedentarization and cultural tourism. An empirical study by Wiessner (2003:151-153) shows that among Namibia’s Bushmen, sedentarization and decades of dependence on welfare and conservancy funds correlate to an average adult weight loss of 9%. Strong evidence concerning the failures of Namibian ecotourism and conservancy is also found in John Marshall’s film series, A Kalahari Family – particularly Death By Myth (2002). This study provides impressive detail on the battle between barely-sustainable agriculture and utterly unsustainable tourism. Marshall (2002) shows, for example, that the per capita Bushman income from the nature conservancy he documented was a $10.75 “profit from two years of trophy hunting.”

How many tourists are likely to go to Namibia? How many Western viewers of this film are likely to accept the impression that collateral damage caused by their desire to conserve wild animals at the expense of people is more than compensated by their own tourist dollars? Rhino’s false impression and false solution might resolve the contradiction for Western viewers but they are not very helpful to Himba and Maasai.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Len Kamerling for many ideas that helped me clarify my thinking about this disturbing film.
Bibliography
(all electronic documents accessed June 10, 2010)

Bruner, Edward M.

Bruner, Edward M. and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

Coffman, Jennifer
2008 Review: Milking the Rhino. Electronic document:
http://bullfrogfilms.com/catalog/milk.html [scroll down].

Conklin, Kristie Ann
2009 A documentary proves conservation is possible anywhere. Environmental Practice 11(3):229.

Fratkin, Elliot, Eric Abella Roth and Martha A. Nathan

Galati, John G.

Il Ngwesi
2010 Explore cultural manyatta. Electronic document:
http://ilngwesi.com/experience/culture/.

Marshall, John, director
http://www.der.org/kalfam/part5.html; series description and rental information:

Simpson, David
2008 Director’s Statement. Milking the Rhino press kit. Electronic document:

Talmor, Ruti

Thompson, Michael and Katherine Homewood

Wärnlöf, Christofer

Wiessner, Polly

Zeppel, Heather