James Barrie said that Alton Ballance introduced him to Todd Miller in 1993. He described himself as a “die-hard commercial fisherman,” very concerned about water quality and habitat. So, he accepted Todd’s invitation to join the Federation’s Board.

In speaking about the work of the Board, James Barrie said that the Board is very concerned with communication. It tries very hard to keep people informed and in touch with the organization. When people come to the Federation with a big problem, such as the struggle with Titan Cement, the Federation tries to educate people about the issues they are confronting. Then, the Federation tries to guide them as to how they should proceed and what they need to do in dealing with the problem. Another major activity of the Board, he said, is helping making decisions about what land to buy for conservation purposes. An example is the purchase of Jones Island.

As for the Federation’s presence on Ocracoke, James Barrie said that the fact that the National Park Service owns most of the island has had the effect of protecting Ocracoke, because it limits development. As a result, native Ocracokers haven’t been driven out by high prices caused by luxury developments, as has happened elsewhere. So, the Federation has not had major pressing issues on Ocracoke, according to James Barrie. But, the Federation has carried out some important projects. In the past, he said, Todd helped Ocracokers with development of a land-use plan, so that development would be controlled and marshlands protected. However, over the years developers have tried to modify the land-use plan. Also, the Federation implemented an oyster restoration project at Ocracoke in 2010 and developed a living shoreline project at the NCCAT facility (North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching).

Today, according to James Barrie, a lot of Ocracokers know about the Federation, but the island has very few Federation members. The good environmental groups like the Federation are being cast in a bad light by the Division of Marine Fisheries and the national Marine Fisheries Service, because they make so many regulations. Ocracokers think of these Divisions as “environmentalist” organizations and have a bad opinion of environmentalists because they don’t like all the regulations and the establishment of quotas on the number of fish that can be caught. James Barrie concluded that today it is hard to convince fishermen that the Federation is on their side.

At the moment, there are no big environmental issues on Ocracoke, James Barrie said. The water is so far from the mainland that it is relatively clean. A big political issue, though, is ineffective government on the local level. The ruling powers in Hyde County are on the mainland, and they tend to treat Ocracoke as a “cash cow” feeding tax dollars into the county government. Another problem, he said, is that Ocracokers are gradually losing their sense of community.
In responding to the question of why Ocracoke is a special place for people to visit, James Barrie said that people need a place where they can see and experience the world. Particularly in the summer, people come to Ocracoke and enjoy the beach and the village. The village is so small that kids can run around with a lot of freedom; the village feels like a safe haven. He said that on summer afternoons he sells seafood – clams, crabs, shrimp – to tourists off the back of his truck. It is a very friendly, neighborly experience. Usually in the summer there are about 5,000 people on the island, only 750 of them being permanent residents.

He did note that tourism on Ocracoke is changing. Thirty or so years ago, vacationers used to stay in small cottages; now they want larger, nicer houses. And, the people coming in the summer are different. There used to be a lot of local, ordinary people, farmers and working families, coming to the island from the nearby mainland. Now, tourists tend to have more money and come from longer distances.

Turning to James Barrie’s evaluation of the work of the Federation, he said that the Federation is very good at bringing people together. “We try to be mainstream,” he said, and work with everyone. His one slightly critical comment about the Federation is that he thinks the Federation could use some more local, ordinary people on the Board. He stressed that all of the Board members are good people, but many of them are retired and relatively well-to-do. But, he also said that we need more native local people on the Board, in particular commercial fishermen. Another point he made is the need to work more on educating adults on coastal environmental issues. The Federation is doing well at educating school children, but education of the local adult population is very important.

In James Barrie’s view, the Federation is more a citizen-activist organization than a purely environmental organization. “We try to get people involved,” he said, and to get things done. He stressed that this is one of the reasons why the Federation has a better reputation than some other environmental groups. In his words, “we aren’t against everything.” We are not saying “no” all the time. “We work with the public; we are there to help people.” The Federation is all about helping and involving citizens.

Asked about sea level rise and global warming, James Barrie said that we haven’t noticed sea level rise on Ocracoke. But, he said, global warming is real. One of the strengths of the Federation is that the organization works with all types of environmental groups, and we will have to work with others to educate the public on global warming. But, many people are in denial and don’t want to hear about global warming. He did note that many coastal developers are becoming more sensitive to environmental issues, because they understand that tourism and recreation require clean water.

Finally, on the question of the relationship between people’s religious beliefs and their environmental concerns, James Barrie noted that he is not a regular church-goer. However, he said that he does believe that we are here for a purpose and we should help protect the world. We have some responsibilities in living on this Earth. People should work together in protecting the world and other creatures. We should not kill everything.