

Joe Foster has become a shining light in a project to conserve a major river network after overcoming years of depression.

He is tackling pollution, flooding and invasive species as an apprentice with the Eden Rivers Trust in Cumbria.

The 20-year-old has grown in responsibility to the point where he is considered an ambassador for the charity's drive to enhance and protect the Eden network of rivers, becks and lakes which are under threat from pollution and invasive species.

Battle with depression

But life wasn't always so straightforward for the conservation trainee.

"I struggled through school with depression and wasn't given much help with it," he says.

> "This has completely changed me. It's given me something to feel proud of and to have confidence in myself to do."

"I found it a struggle to get through the day and because I missed so much school I didn't have good grades. I was smart enough to do it but I just didn't have the motivation. Even when I was there I was miserable. It was a horrible,

negative spiral.

“There were days when I didn’t get out of bed. There were days when I didn’t think it was worth going on.”

Joe failed to break the spiral at sixth form and ended up dropping out altogether.

The Cherish Eden project

But a chink of light came via the Trust, which offers apprenticeships with its HLF-supported Cherish Eden project.

Joe says: “This has completely changed me. It’s given me something to feel proud of and to have confidence in myself to do. I never had that before.

“Nothing else had really clicked before.”

Since enrolling two years ago, Joe has mastered skills such as how to use a chainsaw, monitor unwelcome species like Japanese knotweed and killer shrimp and build dams for natural flood management.

Thanks to National Lottery players, Joe's confidence has risen and he now leads groups of schoolchildren who take part in hands-on conservation.

Thanks to National Lottery players, his confidence has risen and he now leads groups of schoolchildren who take part in hands-on conservation and watch practical demonstrations. The apprentice is working towards an NVQ in Work-Based Environmental Conservation, which is accredited by Newton Rigg College in Penrith and can lead to employment in a related field or a degree course.

Joe still has ‘off’ days but for the most part no longer struggles to get out of bed at his home in Kendal to the south of the Lake District.

He says: “Being outside every day is absolutely amazing. The variety is incredible and we’ve been to some amazing places.

“The apprenticeship programme goes across everything the Trust does so there’s administrative stuff and there’s a lot of hands-on conservation. We’ve also learnt about the issues affecting the catchment area.”

Dealing with Storm Desmond

Joe and his fellow apprentices had a dramatic break from their schedule in December when the county was hit by devastating floods caused by Storm Desmond.

Based at Penrith’s Old Fire Station, they helped provide supplies to some of the worst-hit areas and took part in the clear-up effort.

“The response from the local community was truly overwhelming,” Joe says. “It was unreal seeing the extent of the destruction which had left some places completely underwater but I was amazed at how much people rallied round. We just wanted to help out however we could. While we can’t stop destruction on that scale we went back to the apprenticeships knowing we can help to improve the environment for the local community and stop smaller floods.”

Looking forward to the future

Joe now plans to go to university after the apprenticeship ends in March 2017, with a view to working in conservation.

The model student also hopes that he can help others in troubled times by speaking openly about depression, which remains a taboo subject, particularly among young men.

He says: “The apprenticeship has been such an amazing thing for me and I would encourage anyone in my situation who doesn’t enjoy school to try it or to find a similar course.

"I also hope that speaking about my own experiences will help other people with depression to open up and knowing I





Joe has become a model apprentice on the HLFsupport project